JUNE 2007
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ON TEST
AIR CONDITIONERS
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CONVECTION HEATERS
YOGHURT

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Flick the switch

Go with green power

AND THE BEST AIRLINE IS ...?

Cats and dogs — a healthy diet

EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OILS RATED

Jane Mackenzie
Editor

Independent info on kids' food

In May, CHOICE launched a new website: CHOICE Food for Kids (**www.choicefoodforkids.com.au**). We saw a real need to provide parents with independent advice about how healthy kids' foods really are, because so much of the 'information' about children's food comes from sources that are far from unbiased.

Our latest review of breakfast cereals (May 2007) was an example. Most of the cereals aimed at kids continue to be high in sugar, salt or both, and also have very little fibre. Yet the packaging and marketing hype around many kids' cereals boasts about added vitamins and minerals, the goodness of carbohydrates and being 'packed full of energy'. It's little wonder some parents struggle to make sense of all the claims and choose a healthy cereal for their kids.

Other foods aimed at kids are no different. As a letter in this issue (page 7) from an early-childhood teacher says, "My colleagues and I lament about the contents of the children's lunchboxes daily. I feel parent education is a must, as they're the ones who buy the food that's marketed. Armed with CHOICE's information we can now start a campaign to change things."

CHOICE Food for Kids assesses the nutritional value of kids' foods to help parents make healthy choices. Parents can tell us what foods they want assessed, get involved in our food campaigns and tell us their thoughts on kids' foods and the way they're marketed.

Go to www.choicefoodforkids.com.au and check it out for yourself. You'll also see why we gave Sanitarium Weet-Bix Kids the award for the best new kids' food.

Coming soon ...

High chairs

Finding a safe one.

Coffee grinders

Some work a lot better than others.

Parmesan cheese

Deli vs supermarket, Australian vs imported.

about choice

No advertising, no bias ... just reliable, expert advice

CHOICE is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance your quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

We accept no advertisements, receive no government funding and don't take industry freebies. Our income is solely from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and services. All the products we put through full testing are bought by us in the marketplace, except occasionally, to get the latest model, we may buy directly from a manufacturer where we can select a random sample. We never accept gifts for testing from manufacturers or retailers, though we sometimes borrow samples, especially of new products, for quick reviews. There are no hidden agendas and our recommendations are completely impartial — we simply road-test products and services so that consumers don't get ripped off.

Our ratings are based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a Best Buy. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted.

We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote your rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

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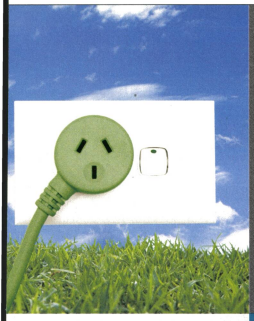

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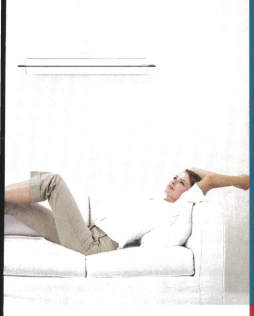

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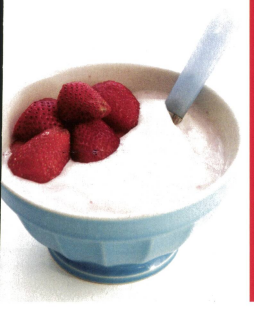

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Due to rising costs, the price of a one-year CHOICE subscription will rise to $78/year ($19.50/qtr) in August 2007. For more, see May 2007, page 6.

Hoodia — the new obesity breakthrough?

A plant that suppresses appetite without any side effects? It's the stuff of dreams for anyone who's overweight (and for drug manufacturers), but whether hoodia is the answer to obesity is yet to be seen.

Hoodia gordonni, a succulent plant (similar to cacti) found in the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa, is thought to have natural appetite-suppressing qualities. Khoi-San people in the Kalahari have used it for centuries to stave off hunger and thirst during hunting trips.

But it's early days yet. Phytopharm, the company developing slimming aids containing P57 (the possible active ingredient in hoodia), says although preliminary research suggests the extract is safe, it's currently undergoing more thorough safety testing.

Phytopharm also says it conducted a study in 2001 that found large doses of the extract caused a significant decrease in calorie intake. However, this study hasn't been published in a scientific journal. Another study, which was published in the September 2004 issue of *Brain Research*, found that injecting the appetite centre of rats' brains with P57 caused the rats to eat less.

A further consideration is that hoodia is an endangered species, so trade threatens the plant's survival. It can only be brought into Australia with a Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) commercial import permit, issued by the Department of the Environment and Water Resources. If you buy hoodia over the internet from an overseas vendor, it's possible it will be seized by the Australian Customs Service and destroyed. Information on buying over the internet can be found at www.tga.gov.au/docs/html/whointer.htm.

Before a therapeutic product can be supplied in Australia, it must be included on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG). There are currently no products that contain *Hoodia gordonii* included in the ARTG, and so no products containing hoodia are approved for general sale in Australia.

CHOICE's sister magazine in the US, *Consumer Reports*, has warned against taking any supplements containing hoodia until more research is done and published in scientific journals. CHOICE agrees.

Shopping trolley safety

A recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics found that over 24,000 children were treated in US hospital emergency departments in 2005 for injuries involving shopping trolleys.

The study found that most injuries were the result of children falling from a shopping trolley, followed by those caused by a trolley tipping over. Most of the injuries were to the head and neck and 85% involved children under five.

In Australia, only Victoria keeps records of shopping trolley-related injuries that result in visits to hospital emergency departments. In 2005 there were 123 injuries, 84% of them to children under five. The vast majority of these accidents (86%) were caused by children falling off a trolley or being hit by one.

There's been a standard in Australia since 1999 specifying that trolleys should have a child restraint, such as a waist strap or tray table, to prevent a child from standing up or climbing out of the trolley. However, while many of the trolleys belonging to the major supermarket chains have restraints, the standard isn't compulsory and parents aren't obliged to use them.

Tips for safe shopping with kids:

- **You can buy an adjustable shoulder harness for your child with side straps that clip onto the trolley. Harnesses are available that fit trolleys as well as high chairs and strollers.**
- **Don't leave your child alone while they're in the trolley.**
- **Don't let them ride outside the trolley.**
- **Don't let them stand up in the trolley.**
- **Ask an older child to walk instead of riding in the trolley and praise them for behaving and staying near you.**
- **Don't allow older children to push the trolley with another child in it as it's easy to tip it over.**

Do not call me

Ever stopped dinner to answer the phone, only to find it's a telemarketer flogging double glazing or a mobile phone deal? For anyone sick of unsolicited telemarketing calls there's some good news.

The Australia Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) recently launched the 'Do Not Call' register. If you sign up your home or mobile phone number for this free service it will be illegal for telemarketers to make unsolicited calls to that number at any time.

While you're cheering, note there are some exceptions to the rule, such as calls from registered political parties, charities, government bodies, educational institutions and religious organisations — they'll still be allowed but will be limited to certain times.

For how to sign up, stay tuned for an advertising campaign, or check out the ACMA website at www.acma.gov.au/donotcall.

Only Australian telephone numbers used primarily for private and domestic purposes can be listed on the register. These include fixed (landline) numbers, mobile phone numbers and voice over internet protocol (VoIP) numbers.

Businesses won't be able to register their phone, mobile or fax numbers. So bad news for those who have a mobile phone provided through work — those annoying calls won't be stopping any time soon.

ACMA has also announced a national industry standard for telemarketing and research calls. The standard will define when calls can and can't be made to all households across Australia. It will apply to all calls, whether or not you're on the DNC register, including those that are allowed if you are (political parties, charities, etc).

No telemarketing calls will be allowed after 8 pm on weekdays and no research calls after 8.30 pm. In addition no calls will be permitted before 9 am on any day, after 5 pm on Saturdays or at any time on any public holiday. The standard also bans all unsolicited calls on Sundays, but an exception to allow research calls then is being assessed by ACMA, with a decision expected on 31 May.

While CHOICE applauds the development of the register and the standard, we're concerned it doesn't go far enough. Bodies such as religious organisations and political parties shouldn't be allowed to call people who, by signing up to the 'Do Not Call' register, have expressed their desire not to be contacted.

If you agree, write to the Minister for Communications Helen Coonan and to Federal Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd, urging them to scrap the exemptions on religious organisations, educational institutions, political parties and charities. To join our campaign and take action go to choice.com.au/donotcall.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

SAVE ON EYEDROPS

If your eyedrop prescription says one or two drops, experts say just one generally does the job fine, as a single drop on average contains at least as much liquid as a normal eye can hold. Good advice from the US *Consumer Reports on Health* that can help you halve your costs.

FLIP UP OR FLIP OUT

Sunglasses claimed to help you manage your anger caught the attention of our counterparts in the US. "Flip up the right-side lens to let in more light, and you stimulate the left brain; flip up the left, and you zap the right ... the experience of logic and reason allows us to see our options for response and when this happens we feel less threatened and less angry," said the literature for the US$70 glasses from NeuView.

To see whether they'd really send you from cranky to calm in a minute or two, as claimed, *Consumer Reports* asked 12 angry men and women to try the shades "during a meltdown". Seven reported no improvement in mood, two a little and one a lot. (The other two said they never got angry enough during their test day to try them.) However, the positive mood swing might have been due to some people breaking into song as they wore the glasses, which reminded them of Stevie Wonder or Elvis, or to the sheer hideousness of the glasses when they saw them worn by others.

UNBLOCKING DRAINS

Caustic soda is more effective at unblocking drains than most "newfangled" chemical cocktails, our sister organisation in the UK found when it tested drain unblockers. In fact, some of the new, alternative products it tested were less effective than a kettle of hot water. So try a plunger first to unblock a drain, *Which?* advises, and if that doesn't work, use hot water before you resort to chemicals.

Pretty baby

Like most proud parents Donna thought her baby was cute enough to be in advertising. She contacted a child modelling agency to see if there were any opportunities for her son, and an 'audition' was organised. She received paperwork beforehand that noted not all children were suitable for modelling work and there'd be no guarantees that her child would be accepted, but decided to audition anyway. On the day of the audition, though, she noticed everyone there that day was accepted, including her own child.

She paid a registration fee of $500 in cash and her son was photographed. Over the following12 months, apart from a letter confirming her child's acceptance and receiving some copies of the photos at an additional cost of $80, Donna never heard from the agency again.

Although she's philosophical about the expense and the lack of work she's also curious about how many other parents didn't receive any further contact from the agency. As she says, "A quick calculation of 30 children at $500 is $15,000 — not a bad day's work for the agency."

Simon Whipp, Director of the Media, Arts and Entertainment Alliance, says aspiring actors or models of any age should be extremely wary before giving money to agents. He says the MEAA receives many complaints about unscrupulous acting and modelling agents for both children and adults. Although many agents are very professional, unfortunately some agencies' primary source of business is "charging upfront fees and churning people through their books".

RF

If you're still keen to try your luck on the rocky road to fame and fortune the MEAA recommends asking plenty of questions before committing yourself to an agent. In NSW, agents are regulated by the Entertainment Industry Act and must be licensed. The MEAA recommends asking to see an agent's licence or checking with the Department of Industrial Relations.

For those in other states, agents to avoid are those that charge more than the industry-accepted 10% commission on any money earned, and those who charge expensive upfront joining fees or want payment for professional photographs. Also ask agents how many people they already have on the books — the more clients, the less chance of work. And avoid agents who advertise constantly for new talent. "If an agent is really serious about finding talent, they will go to drama schools; they will do their own searches," says Simon Whipp. "They don't need to advertise heavily."

Watering your house?

Houses in parts of Australia are cracking under the strain of drought — literally. When clay soils dry out, house foundations shift, causing cracks in brickwork. Cracks up to 5 mm wide aren't necessarily a problem, but larger cracks up to several centimetres wide have been reported.

There's been a flurry of recent reports on the phenomenon, many of which recommend people irrigate their foundations to close cracks up or prevent cracking. This may or may not be sound advice if you're using collected rainwater (the jury's still out on whether it really helps), and is harder to justify if you're using tap water. But of greater concern is the recommendation that people use greywater, especially washing machine water.

Our recent chemical analysis of laundry detergents (*Clean and green?*, CHOICE, April 2007) showed that many are highly saline and high in sodium. As we pointed out in the article, using the wash cycle water regularly on your garden could permanently alter the soil structure, making it hard, compact and dry, and resistant to water penetration. You don't want that happening to your garden, and you certainly don't want that for the soil supporting your home. Furthermore, the salinity can corrode stone, concrete and brickwork, damp coursing, and metal and cement pipes — again, not what you want for your home.

While it seems a shame to waste this resource, unless your wash cycle grey water is filtered and treated, the best place for it appears to be down the drain.

The gift that doesn't keep on giving

Could I suggest that you look into so-called 'gift' vouchers/cards that many stores sell?

The 'giver' has put down hard-earned cash for the voucher and the recipient is locked into spending money in that store.

However, it seems many gift vouchers or cards now have expiry dates, after which they pocket your money. Also, many won't give any cash back, so that little bit remaining if what you buy is slightly less than the total goes into their pocket too.

I see this as a total rip-off, and in the future I'll simply be slipping a $20 note into the birthday card instead.

David Smith

We've received quite a few complaints about gift vouchers. Many readers tell us they weren't aware of an expiry date on their vouchers or have been unhappy when they've purchased items that weren't the full price of the voucher but have been refused a credit note or cash for the difference.

Unfortunately there's nothing that regulates the terms and conditions on gift vouchers — they're at the discretion of the company that issues them.

If you decide to buy a gift voucher for someone, check the conditions first. Questions to ask include: how long is the voucher valid for? Where can it be used? Can it be partially redeemed for cash if an item of lesser value is purchased? And can it be used as partial payment for something more expensive?

If you're given a gift voucher, before you put it away for a rainy day, check the expiry date and keep it in a safe place — gift vouchers should be treated no differently from cash. If you lose it, most likely you won't be able to use it.

A weighty issue

I love your online articles about childhood obesity — thanks for all the ammunition. As early-childhood teachers, my colleagues and I lament about the contents of the children's lunchboxes daily. Armed with CHOICE's information we can now start a campaign to change things.

I feel parent education is a must as they're the ones who buy the food that's marketed. Some parents are very good at educating their kids about food and this is evident in a few healthy lunchboxes and the kids who bring them, who don't complain but just eat it.

We also find that what we say at school goes. If we promote something the kids will persuade their parents to buy differently.

Rosemary Tite

*We agree. With all the marketing hype around many kids' foods it can be difficult for parents to tell just how healthy they really are. Our new website, **www.choicefoodforkids.com.au**, will help parents make sense of it all, so that they can choose healthier choices for their kids. And it's simple enough for kids to use, too.*

CHOICE Food for Kids assesses the nutritional value of kids' foods. You can also nominate a food you want us to assess, participate in our food campaigns and tell us what you think about kids' food and the way it's marketed.

Water savers

Our local council, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council in Victoria, swaps an existing showerhead for a water-efficient one at no charge to ratepayers. I recently took advantage of this offer and was given an INTERBATH Classic II Rainmaker Hi-Lo showerhead. It's now replaced the old model that a friend described as the "world's best shower", and while I haven't had the opportunity to try the other models you tested in your March 2007 issue I'm really pleased with the new one.

I find the coverage and pressure compare well with the old one, so I was surprised to see it was given a relatively low rating. I wonder if it was marked down because some trialists described the trickle setting as "useless". They appear to have missed an important advantage of this setting, which allows you to reduce the water flow while soaping up or shampooing and then, with the flick of a switch, revert to full pressure to rinse off, without having to reset the temperature and water pressure — a big advantage!

Chris Quinn

A trickle setting or simply turning the shower off when you lather up is a great way to save even more water. Many councils and water suppliers are now offering incentives to residents for saving water, such as rebates for water-efficient washing machines or for installing a rainwater tank. Some are also offering free water-efficient showerheads — contact your local council for more information. ■

THUMBS UP!

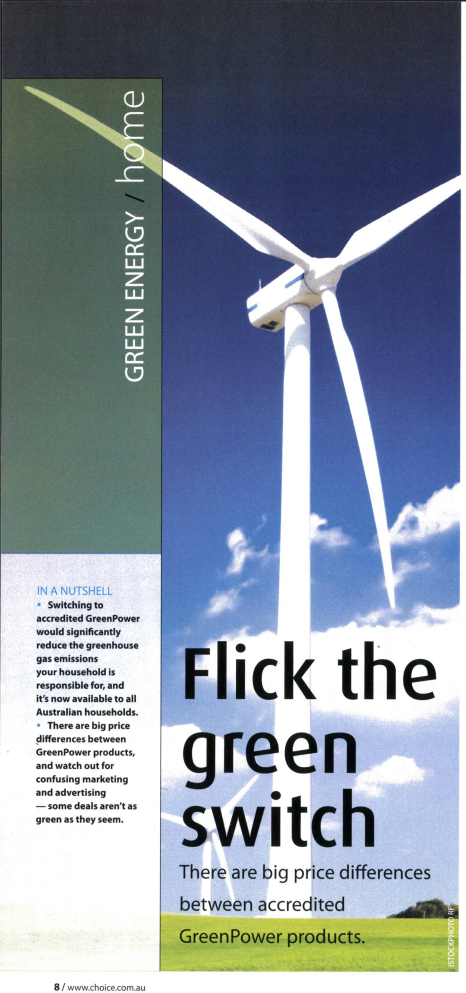
- Hakan Isen would like to give the thumbs-up to the people at SHRIRO who are responsible for GAGGIA coffee machines. When he called to find out how to get a new milk-frothing aid for his three-year-old machine, he was asked for his address and was delighted to receive a new part in the mail not long after.
- Fiona Brillantes had a laundry disaster recently when she washed a new red tablecloth with her other laundry, turning the whole lot pink. She contacted DYLON dye company to ask for some urgent advice and received a detailed explanation about what to do with her clothes as well as some product samples.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had to a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to Thumbs up at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, David Smith, receives *It ain't necessarily so ... bro*, or any other book of his choice from the list on choice.com.au/books.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.



Flick the green switch

There are big price differences between accredited GreenPower products.

STOCKPHOTO.NET

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Switching to accredited GreenPower would significantly reduce the greenhouse gas emissions your household is responsible for, and it's now available to all Australian households.**
- **There are big price differences between GreenPower products, and watch out for confusing marketing and advertising — some deals aren't as green as they seem.**

CHOICE's analysis of GreenPower products has found massive price differences between both retailers and products.

GreenPower generally costs more than standard electricity, but what you'll pay depends on the percentage of accredited GreenPower and the retailer you choose. The average household *could* pay over $400 a year extra for 100% GreenPower — roughly an additional 20% to 40% above government-regulated standard electricity rates — but using our guide to choose a cheaper retailer would cut that bill by half or even more (depending on your consumption, where you live and which retailers are available).

Buying less than 100% GreenPower does less to help the environment but is obviously cheaper — 25% GreenPower would cost under $100 a year extra for most people. Several companies offer 10% accredited GreenPower at no extra cost above regulated electricity rates.

How to get a good price

See *What to buy*, far right, for a state-by-state summary, or use the table on page 12 to make your own choice.

- Check what's available from your present supplier and from other retailers in your state or territory.
- Check a couple of recent bills to find out if you're a low, average or high consumer of electricity.
- Compare products' percentage of GreenPower and prices. The prices we show are the premium you'd pay for GreenPower, above standard electricity rates.
- Check whether there's a fixed-term contract. Most green products don't require you to sign up for a fixed term, but some have two or three-year contracts. If you want to cancel and move to another provider during that time, early exit fees can apply — up to $125.
- Decide if you want to buy GreenPower from your current supplier, switch to a new electricity supplier (check if there's an exit fee), or stay with your existing supplier but buy GreenPower credits from a separate company (see *Going for credits*, page 10).

The best choice of company and product depends on where you live and whether you're a low, average or high consumer of electricity, because companies use different pricing methods that will suit different people:

- **Consumption-based pricing** What you pay for GreenPower is based on how much electricity you use. The extra premium for 100% GreenPower ranges from 3 cents to 7 cents per kilowatt hour (kWh). Consumption-based pricing can work out as particularly good value if your electricity consumption is lower than average (see *Low-consumption apartment*, page 11, for an example).

- **Fixed price** You pay the same price for GreenPower regardless of how much electricity you use. This could provide high-consumption households with good value, depending on the price. The differences are really wide, with the cost ranging from around $2 to $8 per week for 100% accredited GreenPower. On the other hand, fixed-price products can be particularly expensive for low-consumption households, who effectively subsidise the average and high users. And even high users who choose the wrong fixed-price product could pay more than they need to, while only adding the same amount of GreenPower to the National Electricity Grid. *High-consumption household* on page 11 illustrates this point.
- **Block-based** You pay for a chunk of accredited GreenPower (for example, buy a block of 5, 10 or 15 kWh per day).

Discounts and bonuses of up to 5% or so per year are often available from retailers (for all electricity, not just green), making price comparisons trickier. Check available discounts when switching electricity supplier.

How GreenPower works

GreenPower is the government program that accredits, polices and audits green electricity in Australia. Only energy that comes from genuinely renewable sources built after 1997 (to support and create investment in new renewable energy) and approved by the government scheme can be sold under the brand name GreenPower. This article compares accredited GreenPower products.

Electricity that's fed into our homes comes from the National Electricity Grid, which gets its power from generators of both 'green' and 'black' electricity. At present, the mandatory amount of renewable (green) energy that must be fed into the grid each year is pretty low — around 2% to 3%. That excludes additional GreenPower sales, which is where you can make a contribution.

When you buy accredited GreenPower, that percentage of the electricity you use is replaced in the grid by energy from new renewable sources. So you're increasing the proportion of green energy in the grid.

Buying GreenPower doesn't mean different electricity will flow into your home (you won't have 'green' electrons powering your toaster or TV), but with accredited products you're assured by the state governments running the initiative that the energy you use will be replaced in the grid by clean renewable energy, rather than energy from 'black' sources. You'll also be supporting investment in new renewable energy generators.

Accredited energy sources include biomass (waste), hydro, wind and solar. The specific source of energy may affect some people's choice — you may, for example, >

WHAT TO BUY

For the average electricity consumption (6470 kWh/year), the best price (which you'd pay on top of the standard government-regulated tariff) for a year's worth of 100% accredited GreenPower depends on where you live:

ACT COUNTRY ENERGY	$228.80
NSW COUNTRY ENERGY and JACKGREEN ENERGY	Both $228.80
Queensland ORIGIN ENERGY	Approx. $200.00
SA and **Victoria** ENERGYAUSTRALIA	$104.00
WA SYNERGY	$194.10

Check what buying accredited GreenPower credits would cost you as an alternative — for some consumption patterns it could be cheaper than these companies (see *Going for credits*, page 10).

The **NT** and **Tasmania** don't participate in the GreenPower scheme. However, the average household there could also buy 100% accredited GreenPower credits from GreenSwitch ($239.39/year at the time of writing).

Low-consumption apartment and *High-consumption household* on page 11 give examples of the best prices for households with a lower and a higher than average consumption. The table on page 12 also shows annual GreenPower premiums for lower and higher than average electricity consumption.

Why go green?

The burning of fossil fuels, such as the coal used to generate electricity for most of our homes, causes greenhouse gas emissions, which trap heat in the earth's atmosphere, resulting in global warming and climate change. In Australia, per capita electricity consumption, powered mainly by coal, is high. The uncomfortable reality is that most of us are directly contributing to a looming environmental catastrophe.

One simple and relatively cheap way that we can start to address this problem is by switching our electricity to accredited GreenPower. This means buying power generated from clean renewable sources such as the sun, wind, water and waste (biomass), rather than coal.

The average Australian household emits around seven tonnes of greenhouse gases from its domestic electricity consumption alone every year (that's not including greenhouse gas emissions from other sources such as our cars). Choosing a 100% accredited GreenPower product would reduce those emissions to nil. That'd have the same effect as taking the average car off the road for over a year.

LOOK FOR THE LOGO

The logo, above, indicates that a product is accredited. The percentage (75% in this example), tells you the proportion of accredited GreenPower.

The remaining 25% could be from 'black' energy, such as coal, or from old renewable sources such as old hydro energy schemes. Only the accredited portion makes a difference to the growth of new renewable energy and to reducing greenhouse gases in the future, so if that's what you want to do, only buy accredited GreenPower products — and obviously, 100% accredited makes the biggest difference.

< prefer to support wind or solar over hydro generators. It can also affect the price.

The accredited GreenPower scheme generally has the support of environment groups, although some critics don't think its minimum requirement for accredited products to have at least 10% GreenPower is high enough. Industry critics of the scheme are generally confined to a few companies that sell unaccredited products or products that don't have full accreditation, and which don't agree with the scheme's accreditation requirements (see *Confusion rife*, below, for more on this).

Everyone has a choice

Accredited GreenPower is now available to everyone in Australia — even in states where electricity competition hasn't yet been introduced. Although consumers in Queensland and WA don't currently have a choice of electricity supplier (Queensland will have full retail competition from 1 July 2007), they can choose their supplier's GreenPower option, or buy GreenPower credits from companies such as ACTEWAGL, CLIMATE FRIENDLY and GREENSWITCH.

Tasmania (where hydro power is supplied to most homes) and the NT don't participate in the GreenPower scheme, but there you can also buy accredited GreenPower credits from the same three companies (see *Going for credits*, below, for details).

Confusion rife

Not all renewable electricity products count as 'green' for accreditation, and this can make it harder to understand what you're being sold. For example, RED ENERGY sells '100% renewable' energy from Snowy Hydro. But this isn't GreenPower, and the company doesn't claim it is. RED ENERGY says the requirement that accredited GreenPower generators be built from 1997 is an "arbitrary line in the sand", and that its power generated by an 'old' renewable source is preferable to some 10% accredited products that source up to 90% of their energy from coal. The counter-argument is that while energy from the Snowy Mountains scheme comes from a renewable source, buying it doesn't change the proportion of renewable energy being produced in Australia, one of the main aims of the GreenPower scheme.

A second source of potential confusion for would-be green power buyers is that some GreenPower products claim to be '100% renewable' when they have a non-accredited portion (often called the 'backfill') that like RED ENERGY's products comes from old renewable energy. Allowing a GreenPower product to claim '100% renewable' when parts of it aren't accredited is unhelpful to consumers trying to help the environment by purchasing new renewable energy. For evidence of this, see *'Renewable' doesn't always mean what you think*, below right.

With the potential for confusion in mind, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, acting for environmental group Total Environment Centre (TEC), has made an official complaint to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission about the environmental claims in the advertising of some renewable energy products. TEC alleged that several companies misrepresented the environmental benefits of their products and engaged in misleading advertising.

The ACCC had yet to respond at the time of writing, although TEC notes that some of the problem products have already been withdrawn following its complaint and pressure from consumers and environmental groups. >

MORE INFORMATION

- **Australian Conservation Foundation: acfonline.org.au.**
- **GreenPower scheme: greenpower.gov.au.**
- **Green Electricity Watch: A 2006 report, due to be updated this year, that ranks electricity products and companies. It's from environmental groups Australian Conservation Foundation, Total Environment Centre and WWF. Go to greenelectricitywatch.org.au.**

Going for credits

Some companies buy GreenPower credits on your behalf, while you remain with your current electricity supplier and pay your usual bill. The first two companies below don't supply electricity to homes, but the government audits their GreenPower sales and products in the same way as other retailers, ensuring that new renewable energy is fed into the grid as a result of your purchase.

- **CLIMATE FRIENDLY** Its Emerald product is 100% accredited GreenPower; Green is 50% accredited (with the remaining 50% from Gold Standard green energy credits — renewable energy from overseas). In early March, their respective annual prices above standard tariffs were $323.50 and $236 (for average annual consumption). Prices for other consumption levels can be calculated at climatefriendly.com or by calling 1300 254 6283.
- **GREENSWITCH** You choose the percentage of accredited GreenPower and the mix of biomass, hydro, wind and solar energy (prices vary). When we checked, the average household would pay $239 for 100% GreenPower using the default GreenSwitch 'Mix' option. Go to greenswitch.com or call 03 9822 6335 to calculate what it'd cost you (prices are based on how many kWh you buy).
- **ACTEWAGL** supplies electricity to homes in the ACT and southern NSW, but consumers outside those areas can also buy GreenPower credits from the company. Their payments are used to buy energy from renewable sources, which is added to the national grid. See the table for prices.

Low-consumption apartment

CHOICE employee Uta lives in a two-bedroom apartment in Sydney. Her annual electricity consumption of around 2500 kWh is less than half that of the national average household, but still causes over two tonnes of greenhouse gases to be emitted into the atmosphere each year.

She recently signed up for a 10% accredited product, but is now keen to switch to 100% GreenPower. This could cost over $400 extra per year if she went with her current supplier's fixed-price product — a fixed price often works out more expensive for people who use less than average.

"I couldn't afford to pay an extra $400 per year," Uta says. "And I don't think it's fair that I'd be paying the same price for GreenPower as a large house that consumes much more electricity, while my energy provider will only offset the energy that I actually use."

Uta could switch to INTEGRAL ENERGY Ingreen Pure for her electricity supply and pay $110 per year for 100% GreenPower based on her actual consumption, on top of her standard tariff.

But an even cheaper option for her low electricity consumption would be to buy a block of GreenPower from GREENSWITCH. This company sells GreenPower credits on a per kWh basis (see *Going for credits*, far left). When we checked in March, she could buy 2500 kWh of 100% accredited GreenPower credits for under $90 a year — less than a quarter of the current dearest fixed-price options. With GreenPower credits she wouldn't have to leave her present supplier or pay any exit fees, because she'd continue to get electricity from her existing supplier.

High-consumption household

Catherine, Nick and Shelley share a house in Sydney. Their annual electricity consumption is about 8500 kWh per year, which costs close to $900 with ENERGYAUSTRALIA (EA) in NSW. They're interested in GreenPower and could switch to one of EA's accredited products for an extra fee:

- $52.80 extra per year extra for 10% GreenPower, or
- $435.60 above what they currently pay for the 100% accredited product.

The housemates are interested in 100% GreenPower but say they simply can't afford EA's price — and in fact its fixed price for 100% GreenPower in NSW ($108.90/qtr) is extremely high when compared to other options (whereas in SA and Victoria it has the cheapest options for our scenarios).

An alternative for the household could be JACKGREEN, which charges $4.40 per week irrespective of how much electricity you use — Catherine, Nick and Shelley could switch their electricity to JACKGREEN and pay $228.80 per year for 100% GreenPower (on top of the standard rate for electricity). Alternatively, they could buy a smaller proportion — for example, 10% accredited GreenPower would cost from zero to $93.50 extra per year, depending on the retailer and scheme they chose.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

'Renewable' doesn't always mean what you think

Robyn was attracted to products from JACKGREEN ENERGY, based on brochures saying the company provided "100% renewable energy at no extra cost".

"I did think the 100% renewable energy claims sounded too good to be true and was sceptical," Robyn says. "I called their sales rep to find out more. He said the energy was sourced from wind farms and other sources. So we signed up, paying the same price as for our existing electricity."

Robyn got a surprise when she learned that the product she'd signed up to didn't have full GreenPower accreditation. "It turned out that just 10% of the electricity was accredited GreenPower."

In relation to the product Robyn bought, JACKGREEN told us, "All we are doing is providing an offset position for the non GreenPower accredited portion and we in no shape or form represent anything different."

Environmental groups argue that the description of the unaccredited portion of products as 'renewable' is likely to confuse people. CHOICE shares that concern.

Other companies make similar claims — for example, INTEGRAL ENERGY's website describes its 10% accredited Ingreen Home as "100% renewable". The company told us this product is being phased out and that it won't sell 'old' renewable energy to new customers from 1 June (that's why the product doesn't appear in the table). Existing customers still have up to three years left in their contracts, though.

On the positive side, JACKGREEN stopped selling unaccredited products to new customers in 2006. All its products now have some level of accredited GreenPower, ranging from 10% to 100%, and its prices are often competitive. Customers who bought a non-accredited product from JACKGREEN can get a free upgrade to 10% GreenPower (see the table for contact details).

GREEN ELECTRICITY PRODUCTS: AVAILABILITY AND ACCREDITATION				PRICING (GREENPOWER PREMIUM)		
Retailer (in order of highest accreditation / lowest price)	**Product**	**States available**	**GreenPower accreditation (%)**	**Price: average household ($/year)**	**Price: low-consumption household ($/year)**	**Price: high-consumption household ($/year)**
EnergyAustralia	Green Saver Premium	SA, Vic	100	104.00	104.00	104.00
Victoria Electricity	Premium Green (B)	Vic	100	120.45	120.45	120.45
Synergy	NaturalPower	WA	100	194.10	105.00	255.00
Origin Energy	Earth'schoice	Qld	100	200.00	110.00	260.00
Country Energy	ForeverGreen	ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, Vic	100	228.80	228.80 (H)	228.80 (H)
Jackgreen	JackgreenPower	NSW, Qld, SA, Vic	100	228.80	228.80	228.80
Neighbourhood Energy (A)	GreenSwitch Neighbourhood	Vic	100	258.80	140.00	340.00
Integral Energy	Ingreen Pure (C)	NSW	100	285.00	154.00	374.00
Australian Power & Gas	Greentricity 100 (C)	NSW, Qld (D), Vic	100	312.00	312.00	312.00
ActewAGL	GreenChoice	All (E)	100 (G)	355.85	192.50	467.50
AGL Energy	Green Energy	NSW, SA, Vic	100	355.85	192.50	467.50
Origin Energy	GreenEarth Wind	NSW, SA, Vic	100	355.85	192.50	467.50
TRUenergy	Wind Power	ACT, NSW, Qld (F), SA, Vic	100	373.64	202.13	490.88
Origin Energy	GreenEarth Solar	NSW, SA, Vic	100	396.61	214.55	521.05
Integral Energy	Ingreen Future	NSW	100	427.00	231.00	561.00
EnergyAustralia	PureEnergy Premium	ACT, NSW	100	435.60	435.60	435.60
Synergy	NaturalPower	WA	75	145.58	78.75	191.25
Synergy	NaturalPower	WA	50	97.05	52.50	127.50
Jackgreen	JackgreenPower	NSW, Qld, SA, Vic	50	114.40	114.40	114.40
Australian Power & Gas	Greentricity 50 (C)	NSW, Qld (D), Vic	50	156.00	156.00	156.00
Country Energy	Countrygreen LivingGreen	ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, Vic	50	171.60	171.60 (H)	171.60 (H)
TRUenergy	Planet Plus	ACT, NSW, Qld (F), SA, Vic	50	185.04	100.10	243.10
Ergon Energy	Clean Energy	Qld (regional)	50	200.00	110.00	260.00
Synergy	NaturalPower	WA	25	48.53	26.25	63.75
Jackgreen	JackgreenPower	NSW, Qld, SA, Vic	25	57.20	57.20	57.20
AGL Energy	Green Living	NSW, SA, Vic	20	51.48	51.48	51.48
Origin Energy	GreenEarth	NSW, SA, Vic	20	52.00	52.00	52.00
TRUenergy	Planet	ACT, NSW, Qld (F), SA, Vic	20	92.52	50.05	121.55
EnergyAustralia	Green Saver 2 (B)	SA, Vic	10	0	0	0
EnergyAustralia	EnergyAustralia Green	SA, Vic	10	0	0	0
Integral Energy	Ingreen Living (C)	NSW	10	0	0	0
Jackgreen	JackgreenPower	NSW, Qld, SA, Vic	10	0	0	0
TRUenergy	Go Green (B)	ACT, NSW, Qld (F), SA, Vic	10	0	0	0
Victoria Electricity	EcoGreen (B)	Vic	10	0	0	0
TRUenergy	Planet Starter	ACT, NSW, Qld (F), SA, Vic	10	46.26	25.03	60.78
AGL Energy	Green Spirit	NSW, SA, Vic	10	51.48	51.48	51.48
Australian Power & Gas	Greentricity 10	NSW, Qld (D), Vic	10	52.00	52.00	52.00
EnergyAustralia	PureEnergy 10	ACT, NSW	10	52.80	52.80	52.80
Integral Energy	Ingreen Power	NSW	10	71.17	38.50	93.50
Country Energy	Countrygreen Energy	ACT, NSW, Qld, SA, Vic	10	78.00	78.00 (H)	78.00 (H)

Pricing basis	Price quote online*	CONTACT Phone	Website
2/week		13 88 08	energy.com.au
120.45/year	✓	1300 136 749	victoriaelectricity.com.au
. ¢/kWh	✓	13 13 53	synergyenergy.com.au
10/330 kWh (J)	✓	1300 308 624	earthschoice.com.au
470 kWh ($228.80/year)	✓	13 23 56	countryenergy.com.au/green
4.40/week	✓	1300 465 225	jackgreen.com.au
. ¢/kWh	✓	1300 764 860	neighbourhood.com.au
.4 ¢/kWh	✓	131 002	integral.com.au
6/week	✓	133 298	australianpowerandgas.com.au
G)	✓	13 14 93	actewagl.com.au/greenchoice
5.5 ¢/kWh	✓	131 245	agl.com.au/green
5.5 ¢/kWh	✓ (L)	132 463	originenergy.com.au
5.8 ¢/kWh	✓	133 466	truenergy.com.au
5.13 ¢/kWh	✓ (L)	132 463	originenergy.com.au
5.6 ¢/kWh		131 002	integral.com.au
$108.90/qtr	✓	13 15 35	energy.com.au
8 ¢/kWh	✓	13 13 53	synergyenergy.com.au
9 ¢/kWh	✓	13 13 53	synergyenergy.com.au
62.20/week	✓	1300 465 225	jackgreen.com.au
63/week	✓	133 298	australianpowerandgas.com.au
6470 kWh ($171.60/year)	✓	13 23 56	countryenergy.com.au/green
2.9 ¢/kWh	✓	133 466	truenergy.com.au
640/1332 kWh (K)	✓	13 10 46	ergon.com.au
9 ¢/kWh	✓	13 13 53	synergyenergy.com.au
61.10/week	✓	1300 465 225	jackgreen.com.au
99 ¢/week		131 245	agl.com.au/green
61/week	✓	132 463	originenergy.com.au
1.43 ¢/kWh	✓	133 466	truenergy.com.au
No extra cost		13 88 08	energy.com.au
No extra cost		13 88 08	energy.com.au
No extra cost	✓	131 002	integral.com.au
No extra cost	✓	1300 465 225	jackgreen.com.au
No extra cost	✓	133 466	truenergy.com.au
No extra cost	✓	1300 136 749	victoriaelectricity.com.au
0.7 ¢/kWh	✓	133 466	truenergy.com.au
99 ¢/week		131 245	agl.com.au/green
$1/week	✓	133 298	australianpowerandgas.com.au
$13.20/qtr	✓	13 15 35	energy.com.au
1.1 ¢/kWh		131 002	integral.com.au
6470 kWh ($78 pa)	✓	13 23 56	countryenergy.com.au/green

USING THE TABLE

The table profiles the majority of accredited products. It ranks products by:

GreenPower accreditation From 100% to 10%, the minimum allowed.

Price Products are then ranked within each accreditation percentage group by the annual premium (including GST, and on top of the standard regulated electricity tariffs) that the average household would pay. It's based on the average Australian household's consumption of 6470 kWh per year.

We also show premiums for households with lower (3500 kWh/year) and higher (8500 kWh/year) consumption, so you can check which price is most relevant to you.

Pricing basis Products charge a fixed price per week or year, a price based on consumption, or a price based on buying one or more 'blocks' of GreenPower (you can't buy a portion of a block, so a block may be more or less than you need to be on 100% GreenPower, for example). Your household usage pattern can mean one kind is better value for you than another — see *How to get a good price*, page 8, for more.

Information correct as at 6 March 2007 (except Integral Energy Ingreen Living, to be launched June 2007).

PowerDirect was sold to AGL in March 2007. Its products are under review so they're not included in the table.

** All companies give a quote over the phone.*

(A) Agent for GreenSwitch (see Going for credits, *page 10) as well as an electricity supplier.*

(B) Two-year contract, with an early termination fee ($50–$125 for EnergyAustralia, $70–$90 for TRUenergy, $75 for Victoria Electricity).

(C) Three-year contract, with an early termination fee ($125 for Australian Power & Gas, $95 for Integral Energy).

(D) From June 2007.

(E) ActewAGL supplies electricity to homes in the ACT and southern NSW. Consumers outside those areas can also buy GreenPower credits from ActewAGL — their payments are used to buy energy from renewable sources, which is added to the national grid. See Going for credits *for more.*

(F) From July 2007.

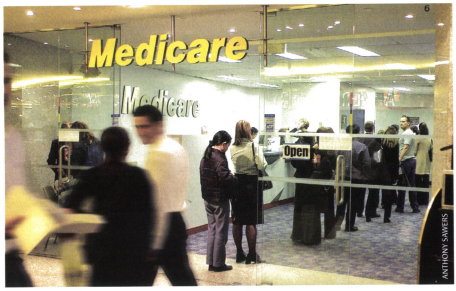
(G) Sold in 5, 10 and 15 kWh per day blocks, so the percentage of GreenPower depends on your consumption and how many blocks you buy. We show the prices for each consumption level assuming the household bought enough blocks to be on 100% GreenPower. For average household consumption, 5 kWh/day is equivalent to 28% GreenPower, 10 kWh/day is 56% GreenPower and 15 kWh/day is 85% GreenPower.

(H) Country Energy is sold in blocks of 6470 kWh of GreenPower. This is more electricity than the low-consumption household uses; for the high-consumption household, only the first 6470 kWh are accredited.

(J) EarthSchoice is sold in blocks of 330 kWh of GreenPower ($10), so your percentage of GreenPower depends on your consumption and how many blocks you buy. We show the prices for each consumption level assuming the household bought enough blocks to be on 100% GreenPower.

(K) Ergon Clean Energy is sold in blocks of 333 kWh ($10/qtr), 50% of which is accredited GreenPower.

(L) Except NSW.



ANTHONY SAWERS

Medicare claims at the surgery

If you're sick of making a special visit to your Medicare office to claim back your doctor's bills, some good news is on the horizon. Medicare is planning to have its new electronic claims system up and running at a surgery near you in the second half of 2007.

If your doctor decides to participate, it means you can make your Medicare claim via the EFTPOS network in the surgery immediately after you've paid your bill. You'll pay your account in whatever way you normally would — cash, card or cheque — and then swipe your Medicare card and debit card through and enter a few details. Your Medicare rebate will be paid straight into your account (it must be a savings or cheque account — payments won't be made into credit card accounts).

If your doctor bulk-bills, it won't change things much for you — you'll get to push an 'OK' button, rather than sign a form. But for serial Medicare queuers, relief may be at hand.

ANOTHER NAIL IN THE LOW-CARB COFFIN

CHOICE has reported in the past on the dangers associated with following low-carb, high-protein diets in the long term: they can put you at risk of heart disease and kidney problems, not to mention increasing your chances of developing osteoporosis.

The latest study from Sweden adds to concerns about the long-term safety of going low-carb. The researchers tracked more than 40,000 middle-aged women for 12 years and looked at the carb and protein levels in their diets.

The study found the more protein and/or fewer carbs the women ate, the more likely they were to die over the period of the study — particularly from heart and other cardiovascular diseases. Diet fast, die early, but make a good-looking corpse … not much of a moral.

Sitting ducks

GENE ROSS/ISTOCKPHOTO RF

Research carried out in New Zealand has found that you're more likely to get deep-vein thrombosis (DVT) from sitting at your work desk for long periods than sitting in a plane.

DVT has the moniker 'economy class syndrome' because sitting immobile in cramped airline conditions increases the risk of clots forming in leg veins. If a clot dislodges it can cause all sorts of havoc in the body — death can result from it lodging in the lungs (pulmonary embolism, or PE).

This new study found over 30% of people attending a post-hospital clinic for DVT or PE reported spending long periods of time sitting at work, compared to around 20% who had recently been on a long-haul flight.

So when working, take time for regular breaks — stretch and move about whenever possible. Don't become the next victim of the new desk-potato syndrome.

High fliers

Which international and domestic airlines rate with our readers?

As accessible as air travel might be for many of us in Australia, with long travel times in the air both at home and overseas, our choice of airline is still important. The surprise result of CHOICE's survey was that QANTAS — the national carrier and the airline most survey respondents had flown with — was rated the least satisfactory airline for international travel and the second least satisfactory in the domestic market.

To find out which airlines are cutting the mustard for domestic and international travel we invited subscribers to both CHOICE and CHOICE Online to take part in an online survey to share their opinions on the airlines they've flown with in the last three years.

We received nearly 4000 completed surveys, with an even split between magazine and online members.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

Come fly with me: international

Our respondents were given the option to rate up to three international airlines they'd used within the last three years. 'Good standard of service', frequent flyer points' and 'value for money' were the most common reasons for choosing an international airline.

Thumbs down for the flying kangaroo

Although 38% of our respondents had flown recently with QANTAS on an international flight, they rated it significantly lower than the average for overall satisfaction. SINGAPORE AIRLINES and EMIRATES (the second and third most flown airlines) rated significantly higher than the average.

The most common reason given for choosing to fly with QANTAS was 'frequent flyer points', and large numbers of our respondents continue to fly with QANTAS even though they rated it relatively low for satisfaction. It seems that the appeal of frequent flyer points, along with a good safety record and sheer force of habit, are driving people to still use QANTAS despite the comparatively poor standard of service they complain about. The most common reason for choosing SINGAPORE AIRLINES, on the other hand, was the 'good standard of service'.

Some comments about QANTAS included:

"It saddens me to admit that as an Australian, I would prefer not to fly with our national carrier if I could reasonably avoid it. However, given the significance of market share that QANTAS has domestically, and the relative absence of a comparable 'comprehensive' product that is able to tie in both Australian domestic and frequent Australian-based international air travel with the likes of linked Club Lounge and frequent flyer points schemes, it's highly likely that I will continue to remain a reluctant captive consumer of their meagre product offering." (Michael, Queensland)

"On a single QANTAS flight, we experienced: an armrest panel missing, which exposed sharp metal edges; a seat which would not recline — my wife spent the whole trip bolt upright; a seat-back video screen which did not work." (Geoffrey, WA)

We asked QANTAS for a response to our survey results. A spokesperson said the company is surprised by the result, particularly in the area of customer satisfaction. "In the past two years QANTAS has been named one of the world's top airlines in the prestigious Skytrax World Airline Awards, the world's largest airline passenger survey, which in 2006 interviewed over 13.6 million travellers. QANTAS achieved the ranking of number two in the world in 2005 and 2006." >

IN A NUTSHELL

- **The quality of service is particularly important on long international flights, and Qantas was rated lowest for this — as well as for overall satisfaction.**
- **Value for money is important for both domestic and international travellers, but it's not everything: Jetstar was regarded as good value but otherwise low for customer satisfaction.**

< We can only speculate that the difference in results beween that survey and CHOICE's might be due to ours having an Australian rather than international base, and a tendency for people to have high expectations of their national carrier and so to be particularly critical of it.

How other airlines rated

Singapore Airlines

SINGAPORE AIRLINES was rated significantly higher than the average for overall satisfaction. It was also significantly more likely to be recommended than the average, with 99% of respondents saying they'd definitely or probably recommend the airline to others.

Survey respondents' comments included:

"We have found that the attitudes from check-in staff and cabin crew with SINGAPORE AIRLINES leave QANTAS way behind. They actually treat you as if you're a valued customer, especially when travelling with young children, and nothing is too much trouble." (Mark, Queensland)

"SINGAPORE AIRLINES have always gone that bit extra to make us more comfortable and we always feel welcome." (Yvonne, WA)

"A hostess from SINGAPORE AIRLINES gave me a cake, gift and a card for my 60th birthday. I was impressed." (Margaret, SA)

Emirates

Operating flights from Australia since 1996, relative newcomer EMIRATES seems to have made a splash on the local international flight scene. Our survey respondents scored EMIRATES second only to SINGAPORE in terms of overall satisfaction.

Some comments about the airline included:

"EMIRATES exercised the best customer service of any airline on which I have flown. Their care for a travelling companion with a disability was peerless." (Phil, NSW)

"EMIRATES just shine out as a great airline over and above their peers." (Jan, Victoria)

"EMIRATES are by far the best. It's easy to use frequent flyer points compared with QANTAS." (John, Victoria)

The rest

The other international airlines with sufficient responses to be rated by our respondents were AIR NEW ZEALAND, MALAYSIA AIRLINES, THAI AIRWAYS and CATHAY PACIFIC. They all received satisfaction ratings around the average. The most common reason for choosing all four airlines was 'value for money'.

Across the wide brown land: domestic

Ninety three per cent of our survey respondents had flown domestically within the last three years, and they rated only the airline they'd flown with most recently. We excluded airlines with less than 50 respondents as it's too small a sample.

Of the four airlines rated, the most people had again flown with QANTAS but rated it lower for overall satisfaction than REX (REGIONAL EXPRESS) and VIRGIN BLUE. JETSTAR was rated the lowest in the group.

The most common reason for choosing JETSTAR and VIRGIN was — not surprisingly given their 'budget' reputation — 'value for money'. As with international flights, people most commonly chose to fly QANTAS for 'frequent flyer points' rather than any other quality. However, it also had a much higher proportion of people who listed its safety record as a factor in choosing a domestic airline. The most common reason for choosing REX was a lack of any other choice for that route or time, although most of its customers gave it a good rating for satisfaction too.

Domestic ratings

Regional Express (REX)

REX was rated significantly higher than the average for overall satisfaction and also above average for satisfaction with cleanliness, check-in procedures, inflight service, seat comfort, legroom and food.

"I've flown numerous times with REX over the past four years and have always found the air hostesses exceptionally friendly and courteous. They've also been wonderful with children flying alone or parents with little ones." (Judy, NSW)

Virgin Blue

VIRGIN BLUE was also rated significantly higher than the average for overall satisfaction and for the booking process, value for money, check-in procedures, the ability to get a convenient flight, cleanliness, inflight service, toilet facilities, seat comfort and legroom. Its only comparatively poor rating was for its entertainment.

"VIRGIN are no frills — food is available for purchase, as are drinks. Not very difficult to take your own food with you. Staff are very helpful and often entertaining." (Elizabeth, ACT)

"VIRGIN has a much better staff/customer relationship than JETSTAR or QANTAS." (Robbie, Tasmania)

QANTAS

Despite being the airline the most people had flown with domestically, QANTAS came out significantly below the average for most attributes and was rated just below the average for overall satisfaction. As noted above, it's not the inflight experience that keeps people flying with the airline.

"QANTAS service is aloof and arrogant. Why is the 'snack' always something fattening like a 'triple choc cookie' or 'banana cake'? Why do we have to pay for alcoholic drinks at certain times of the day? How can QANTAS justify the premium they charge over other airlines?" (Philip, Victoria)

CARBON EMISSION OFFSETS

Just when flying has never been cheaper or more accessible, our awareness of the damage air travel can do to the environment has suddenly peaked.

The statistics are confronting: just two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US can contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

So what can environmentally aware travellers do about it? Next month in CHOICE we'll take a look at the carbon emission offset schemes on offer and what they're all about.

Jetstar

JETSTAR was rated significantly lower than the average for overall satisfaction and for its booking process, cleanliness, the ability to get a convenient flight, inflight service, legroom, food and entertainment.

JETSTAR's driving force is its value for money, for which it rated significantly higher than average. While it boasts an ability to provide routes and times of flights when no other airline can, the comparative lack of satisfaction in our survey with the ability to get a convenient flight tells against this claim.

"There's a huge difference between VIRGIN and JETSTAR. VIRGIN staff attempt to make what is a reasonably unpleasant experience — flying with a no-frills service — light-hearted and enjoyable. The JETSTAR staff were uniformly surly, unhelpful and most definitely unwelcoming. I'll never fly JETSTAR again." (Andy, NSW)

International and domestic contrasts

Not surprisingly, 'value for money' was a common reason for choosing both an international and a domestic airline.

While 'good standard of service' was also important internationally it was less of a consideration on domestic flights — maybe on shorter domestic routes we're less fussed about being looked after and more interested in getting from A to B as cheaply as possible.

Business class is also a lot less popular on domestic flights: 95% of our domestic respondents flew economy vs 73% on international flights.

As for booking, internet bookings are very popular for domestic air travel — about 75% of respondents used the net to book domestic tickets, against only 30% for international flights. This probably reflects the relative complexity of booking international connections. ■

TABLE 1. INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES*

Airline (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Value for money score (%)	Check-in procedure score (%)	Inflight service score (%)	Seat comfort score (%)	Legroom score (%)	Cleanliness score (%)	Food score (%)	Entertainment score (%)	Toilet facilities score (%)	Convenient flight score (%)	Booking process score (%)
Singapore Airlines (224)	78	74	76	81	71	65	82	79	84	75	75	78
Emirates (114)	74	77	75	77	66	61	78	79	80	72	78	80
Air New Zealand (108)	72	71	69	72	67	61	75	68	69	71	73	78
Malaysia Airlines (63)	69	71	68	69	60	56	73	71	74	67	70	75
Thai Airways (70)	68	69	65	69	60	55	71	68	65	66	69	73
Cathay Pacific (67)	66	68	70	69	56	49	71	69	71	67	72	74
Qantas (676)	63	60	67	64	54	48	69	63	67	62	66	73

* *Based on respondents who'd taken an international economy flight within the last three years. Numbers in brackets are the minimum number of survey respondents for each airline across all the categories rated.*

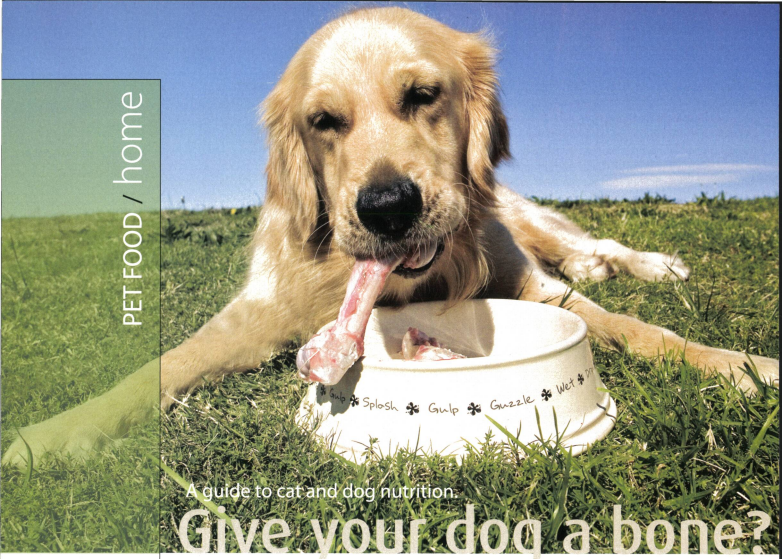
TABLE 2. DOMESTIC AIRLINES*

Airline (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Value for money score (%)	Check-in procedure score (%)	Inflight service score (%)	Seat comfort score (%)	Legroom score (%)	Cleanliness score (%)	Food score (%)	Entertainment score (%)	Toilet facilities score (%)	Convenient flight score (%)	Booking process score (%)
Regional Express (REX) (50)	79	63	78	76	67	60	79	60	(B)	64	70	83
Virgin Blue (437)	71	77	76	68	63	56	74	50	47	67	76	83
Qantas (1345)	67	57	70	64	56	48	70	53	53	63	70	77
Jetstar (171)	62	73	(A)	58	58	49	69	40	38	65	66	76

* *Based on respondents who'd taken a domestic economy flight within the last three years. Numbers in brackets are the minimum number of survey respondents for each airline across all the categories rated.*

(A) Jetstar changed its policy of unallocated to allocated seating as of October 2006; flights covered by the survey were both before and after than date, so the check-in score from our survey probably doesn't reflect the current practice.

(B) Results for entertainment for REX have been excluded because there were fewer than 50 responses.



A guide to cat and dog nutrition:

Give your dog a bone?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Make sure the pet food you buy is labelled 'complete and balanced'.**
- **Critics say commercial pet food causes health problems, but there's no real evidence for that claim.**

There's no denying it — commercial pet food is vastly different from the diet of dogs and cats in the wild. Our furry friends' jaws and teeth are designed to rip through the raw flesh of animal carcasses and crunch bone — not to chew on processed pellets or slurp up cans of soft food.

The ideal would probably be to create your cat or dog's natural diet at home, but few of us have the fridge space for large quantities of meat and bone, or the time to formulate a nutritionally balanced diet. Dogs and cats in the wild eat not only the meat of their prey, but bone, intestines and organs like the liver as well, all of which contain important nutrients.

Are we poisoning our pets?

Very little independent research has been done in Australia on the long-term effects on the health of pets eating commercial pet food — the majority of research is by manufacturers themselves and focuses on the nutrient requirements of dogs and cats.

Critics of the industry claim commercial pet food, whether it's dry, semi-moist or canned, is 'poison to our pets' and not easily tolerated by animal digestive systems, causing health problems. There's little evidence to suggest this is true, as Nick Costa, Professor of Sustainable Agriculture and former professor of Biochemistry and Nutrition in the School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences at Murdoch University, told us: "The average age of dogs has been increasing because we've really developed better ways of treating diseases, better nutrition and better care in general."

However, a link has been made between a soft-food diet and gum disease, which is common in dogs and cats. Most gum disease starts with a build-up of plaque on the teeth — the result of eating a soft-food diet. Before commercial pet foods were available, though, dogs and cats developed tooth disease due to the low calcium content of their meat-based diets.

Periodontal disease, the most severe form of gum disease, destroys the gums and the tissue that supports the teeth and has also been associated with liver, kidney and heart disease. While a study published in the *Journal of Nutrition* claims daily brushing of your pet's teeth is the most effective prevention, an easier way is to supplement your cat and dog's diet with a regular supply of bones.

Bones require considerable gnawing and chewing, which scrapes their teeth and prevents the build-up of plaque. Giving your cat or small dog raw chicken wings and a bigger dog meaty bones several times a week will benefit their dental hygiene tremendously. But never give your pets cooked bones, as they can splinter and get stuck either in the mouth or the digestive system.

There are also some dry pet foods that make a claim to aid dental health, such as ROYAL CANIN Oral Sensitive range. It's packet says "kibble shape and flexible texture produce a mechanical brushing effect", but these specialised products are more expensive.

'Complete and balanced'

'Complete and balanced' refers to a pet food that is formulated to contain all the nutrients required by the dog or cat, in the appropriate quantities and proportions to maintain good health.

To provide 'complete and balanced' nutrition, Australian manufacturers rely on a US government agency, the American Association of Feed Control Officials (AAFCO). In order to pass AAFCO requirements, the manufacturer must either conduct a structured feeding trial of its pet food, or meet AAFCO's specified formulation of nutrients.

AAFCO feeding trials last six months for adult 'maintenance' products, during which time the animals are given only the test food and water, and their health and progress are monitored for signs of nutrition-related disease. Foods that pass this test can carry a label claim along the lines of: "Animal feeding tests using AAFCO procedures substantiate that product X provides complete and balanced nutrition."

If manufacturers are simply meeting recommended nutrition requirements, they'll carry a claim along the lines of: "This formula meets the nutritional levels established by AAFCO."

All the pet foods we looked at, from the premium brands such as HILL'S SCIENCE DIET through to the budget supermarket products, carry AAFCO claims.

Do I need to pay more?

So do we really need to buy premium? Unless your pet has specific dietary problems, probably not. Any pet food that says it's 'complete and balanced' contains all the required nutrients at appropriate levels for the maintenance of healthy pets.

But if you want what humans think of as 'quality' ingredients and nutrient quantities above those recommended by AAFCO, expect to pay more. "The cheaper ones tend to be less flavoursome, less palatable and probably, on the whole, have less meat products in them," says David Fraser, Professor of Animal Science at Sydney University.

Premium brands are more likely to claim they use 'real' muscle meat, fish or poultry as their main ingredient. Some supermarket brands use less muscle meat and make up the balance with meat by-products like organs, blood and bones, which are equally good nutritionally. Many supermarket brands do contain muscle meat, though. A higher proportion of it and other more expensive ingredients can lead to a reduction in faecal volume as the food is more easily digested. Look for 'real meat' or, as we found on a YOU'LL LOVE COLES product, a 'real meat injection.'

There's a warning about one thing, though: feeding your pet solely on pet mince. The Australian Veterinary Association says meats preserved with sulphur dioxide (preservative 220) have been linked to thiamine deficiencies, which can cause heart disease and blindness if they're the main diet. All the brands CHOICE found contain sulphur dioxide, even the gourmet ones, so check the label. If you want to supplement your pet's diet with some raw meat, use human-grade meat (but not sausage mince, as it's allowed to contain sulphur dioxide.)

What about those claims?

The more expensive brands, although not nutritionally necessary for your average pet, do carry some pretty impressive claims.

For example, "a complex synergisation of grape and green tea polyphenols" and "chondroitin, glucosamine and Omega 3 for joint health" both featured on premium pet food packets we looked at. While studies show these nutrients may be beneficial for pets with particular ailments, they're not recognised by AAFCO as essential for pets' normal maintenance.

Manufacturers have to be very careful how they label their products. The Pet Food Industry Association of Australia (PFIAA) works closely with the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA), and manufacturers must ensure their claims are justifiable. "If I was going to address a diseased state or talk about altering the physiology of a dog or cat in a significant way, automatically that product has to be registered as a therapeutic good," says a PFIAA spokesperson.

Pet food sometimes manufacturers avoid having to register their products by claims to the effect of "*helps* to maintain…" or "*helps* avoid…" >

GENE ROSS

< No Australian standard for processed foods

There's no national standard for processed tinned or dry pet food. If it's imported it has to comply with Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) import regulations and must be certified to come from disease-free animals that were inspected before and after slaughter.

For processed pet food made in Australia, some state regulations apply, otherwise the industry is largely self-regulated. The major manufacturers are members of PFIAA and have to comply with its code of practice and AAFCO standards. Manufacturers who breach the PFIAA code may be referred to the appropriate regulatory authority, such as APVMA or the ACCC, and/or suspended or expelled from the association.

There's an Australian standard for frozen and fresh pet meat, which was generated by the Primary Industry Ministerial Council's Meat Standards Committee. The standard covers all stages of the pet meat production process, to ensure it remains separate from human-grade meat, is handled hygienically and is free from harmful diseases. The standard is enforced by the states' controlling authorities.

When beef may not be beef…

Under the Trade Practices Act, pet foods, like any other product, can't make misleading or untrue claims. You can't call a dog roll 'beef' if it doesn't have beef in it. But what if it has some beef — just not very much? There are no government regulatory guidelines, but PFIAA says its code of practice is based on best practice and incorporates standards for labelling, marketing, nutrition design and claims.

For example, the code stipulates that a 'complete and

Home-made diet for your pet

Below is a home-made diet for your pet, formulated by Professor David Fraser of Sydney University, which provides tasty and balanced nutrition for healthy adult dogs and cats. You can make it in the amounts shown here and refrigerate or freeze a few days' worth, depending on how much your pet needs at each meal. It would also be useful to supplement your pet's diet with raw bones for teeth health.

Adult dog

550 g boiled potato
350 g lean meat (lightly stewed)
80 g raw sheep or beef liver
20 g corn oil
20 g bone meal*
5 g table salt
Mix all the ingredients together and feed it to your pet once a day.

Amount to feed each day according to body weight:

Dog weight	Food
5 kg	270 g
10 kg	460 g
15 kg	620 g
20 kg	770 g
25 kg	900 g
30 kg	1000 g

Adult cat

250 g boiled potato
600 g lean meat (lightly stewed)
100 g raw sheep or beef liver
20 g corn oil
25 g bone meal*
5 g table salt
Mix all the ingredients together and feed it to your pet once a day.

Amount to feed each day according to body weight:

Cat weight	Food
2 kg	100 g
2.5 kg	120 g
3 kg	140 g
3.5 kg	160 g
4 kg	190 g
4.5 kg	210 g
5 kg	240 g

ISTOCKPHOTO RF

** Bone meal can be found in certain healthfood stores and is an excellent source of calcium.*

balanced' or 'nutritionally complete' pet food must meet the minimum recommended nutritive requirements for that species. Pet snacks or treats should be labelled 'complementary pet food', as they aren't necessarily nutritionally complete.

Pet food varieties are determined by the amount of varietial meat in the product. The four levels are:

- **Beef** Beef is the main ingredient.
- **Beef dinner** It contains at least 25% beef.
- **With beef** At least 5% of the meat in the product is beef.
- **Beef flavour** Less than 5% of the meat is beef, or a commercial beef flavour has been used.

Ingredients must be listed in descending order by weight — so the first ingredient is the most plentiful. See www.pfiaa.com.au for more info.

Is my pet healthy?

A healthy pet should be neither too fat nor too thin. To make sure your pet isn't putting on (or losing) weight it's advisable either to weigh them regularly or run your hands over their ribs — if they're an ideal weight, you'll be able to feel the ribs but they shouldn't feel too bony.

According to the RSPCA your dog should also be alert and responsive, with good stamina, have a clean, glossy coat and clear eyes, free from discharge. Their nose should be cold and damp when outdoors and dry and warm when indoors.

A healthy cat should also be alert and responsive, yet calm and contented most of the time. They should have a good appetite, a clean glossy coat and clear eyes, free from discharge. ■

Q&A

Should cats and dogs eat the same food?

No. Cats are carnivores and dogs are generally thought to be omnivores. Cats need higher levels of protein and fat from meat than dogs do and can't use vegetable sources to make vitamin A, so must get it from meat. They're also sensitive to thiamine, taurine, potassium and arginine deficiencies. And cats are less able to process carbohydrates due to the shorter length of their long intestine.

Is milk bad for dogs and cats?

Dogs and cats don't need milk as they get their calcium from bones and pet food, but if your pet likes drinking milk, that's fine. Some pets (like some humans) can't tolerate milk and may suffer from diarrhoea. Special reduced-lactose cat and dog milks are available, but they're expensive and usually unnecessary.

Why do dogs and cats eat grass?

Nobody knows for sure, but it's believed some cats and dogs chew grass when they feel nauseous. Others may do it out of boredom or they may just like it. Eating grass isn't harmful and is no cause for alarm.

Do dogs and cats need a variety of foods?

Animals are mostly concerned about meeting their energy needs rather than variety. But if you do feed your pet the same thing every day you might find them reluctant to eat anything else. So a variety could be the best approach to avoid creating problems for yourself.

Do older and younger pets need special foods?

In dietary terms, AAFCO recognises that animals go through three life stages. The first is growth: kittens and puppies have extra nutrient needs and a special food is recommended. The second is when a mother is nursing: special foods are recommended for a lactating cat or dog. The third stage is simply adulthood, during which animals need to maintain their 'complete and balanced' nutrient intake. In most cases, older pets don't need special foods.

Should cats and dogs be fed once a day?

- Once a day is fine for most cats and dogs. Most cats can eat when they like, but if you leave food out for dogs and greedy cats, they're likely to overeat.
- Puppies should be allowed to eat in a short time period until they're full, two or three times a day. If there's any sign of obesity in a pup, reduce its food intake.
- Small breeds and working, pregnant or lactating dogs need to be fed smaller amounts more often, as do kittens and pregnant or lactating cats.

Does dry food cause urinary tract infection?

It used to, but manufacturers have altered the pH level of their formulations. Cats fed on a well-formulated dry food diet don't run a higher risk of urinary tract disease if they're drinking enough water. If your cat doesn't, it's a good idea to feed it a canned-food diet, which has a higher water content.

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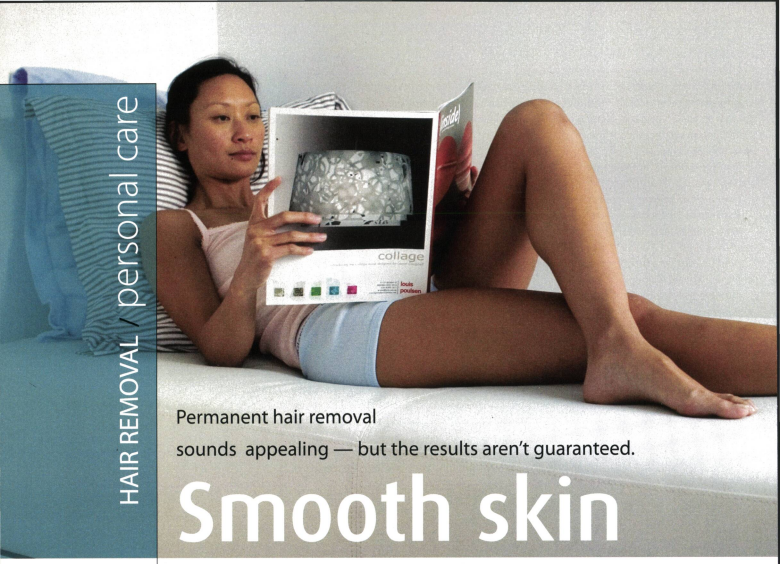


Permanent hair removal sounds appealing — but the results aren't guaranteed.

Smooth skin

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Electrolysis is the only method of hair removal that can claim to permanently remove hair, but it's also slow and relatively expensive.**
- **Laser and IPL hair removal can be reasonably effective on large areas, but there isn't adequate uniform regulation over who can operate this equipment.**

Whether you choose to pluck, wax or zap it, getting rid of unwanted hair professionally can be a time-consuming and often expensive and painful process. Before you decide which method to go for, you need to consider the risks, suitability for your skin and hair type, and the costs.

Electrolysis

What is it?

Electrolysis works by inserting a fine needle into the hair follicle and applying an electric current to destroy the hair root. The loosened hair is then removed with tweezers. It's a slow process as each hair must be treated individually, and only 30 to 40 follicles can be treated in a 15-minute session.

Under the US Food and Drug Administration regulations, electrolysis is the only method that can claim to remove hair permanently, and the Society of Cosmetic Physicians Australasia agrees with this assessment. However, certain factors can cause new hair growth. The stimulus for hair growth in an area can't be removed and hormonal changes may cause new growth.

Who is it for?

Electrolysis is safe for all skin types, if it's done properly. As the treatment is slow and likely to continue for months or even years, it's not a cost-effective method for large areas, such as the back or legs. It's often used by women to get rid of unwanted facial hair.

Risks and side effects

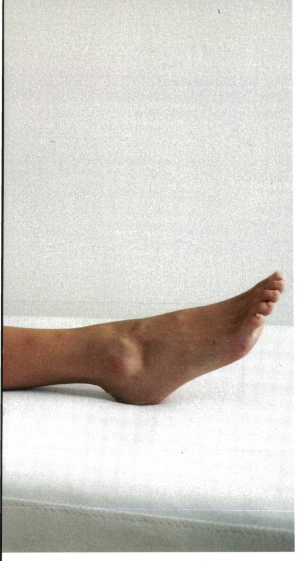
- There's a risk of electric shock if the needle isn't properly insulated.
- The operator must be properly trained. If the needle misses the mark or insufficient electricity is applied the hair root can survive. There's also a risk of scarring if it isn't done properly. Training and qualification in electrolysis is part of the Advanced Association of Beauty Therapists' (AABTh) schools' diploma. AABTh advises people to ask to see a therapist's qualifications in electrolysis before undergoing treatment.
- There may be some temporary redness after treatment.

Does it hurt?

Some people find electrolysis painful, but not many find it hurts enough to need pain relief.

Cost

Usually around $25 for a 15-minute session.



A tale of two lasers...

Lizzie Renkert had six sessions of laser hair removal on her underarms and bikini line, costing $280 per session. The treatment wasn't supervised by a doctor but she says she was well informed about the potential risks and side effects beforehand.

Lizzie is very pleased with the results. "It was very painful but it was over with really quickly," she says.

She'd definitely recommend it to other people. "It's expensive and you need to commit for around 18 months, but it's fantastic when it's over."

Bianca, from Sydney, didn't have such a good result. She had five sessions of laser hair removal at a beauty salon three years ago. It cost $170 per session for treatment on her underarms and bikini line. "They told me I was the perfect candidate because I've got pale skin and dark hair," says Bianca.

After five sessions she hadn't noticed any improvement. "The beautician said it takes a bit longer on some people and I should just keep coming, but it really wasn't worth the cost when I couldn't see any difference," she says.

Laser hair removal

What is it?

Laser hair removal uses a single wavelength of light (laser) to target, heat and damage hair follicles. It's been shown to successfully reduce hair growth but, unlike electrolysis, it can't claim to permanently remove hair.

The laser can treat large areas (such as the back or legs) in one go, so it's much faster than electrolysis. However, you'll still need to have multiple treatment sessions as the laser is most effective when hair is in the anagen or 'growing' phase and only a certain proportion of hairs are in this phase at any one time. Most people need between three and six treatments.

Who is it for?

Laser treatment works best on people with dark hairs and light skin, as the melanin in dark hair absorbs more of the laser energy. Ginger, blonde and white hairs don't respond well to this treatment.

Darker skin types also have to be treated carefully as the pigment in the skin may absorb too much of the laser energy and cause skin damage. However the Nd:YAG type of laser can be safely used on a larger variety of skin types.

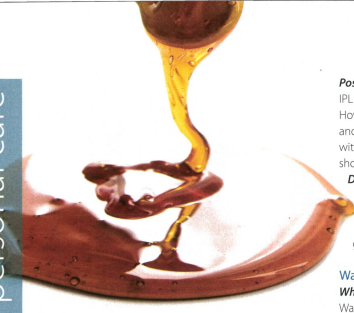
For the treatment to be effective with some kinds of laser, the hair must be darker than the surrounding skin. So if you've got a tan you should let it fade before you have the treatment.

Possible risks and side effects

- Laser light can damage the eyes so you need to wear protective goggles.
- It can cause some redness around the treated area, but this should only last for a few hours.
- There's a risk of skin discolouration (either lightening or darkening of the skin).
- If not applied properly, a laser can burn the skin. There's a risk of blistering after treatment, especially for people with darker skin.
- The Advanced Association of Beauty Therapists (Australia) and the Cosmetic Physicians Society of Australasia advise people only to go to an experienced laser operator working under medical supervision for treatment (see *Laser danger*, page 24).

Does it hurt?

The sensation has been likened to the feeling of an elastic band snapping hard against the skin, but some people find it much more painful than that. Operators may provide a numbing cream to be applied 30 minutes before treatment. >



< Cost

Prices vary significantly between operators. They range from around $50 to $130 per session for the top lip and from $120 to $250 for the bikini line. Some operators offer a discount if you have more than one area treated.

Intense pulsed light (IPL)

What is it?

IPL is a newer treatment than laser. It works on the same principle of heating and damaging the hair follicle, but instead of using a single wavelength a flash lamp emits hundreds of wavelengths in each burst of light. However, as the beam tends to cover a larger area than a laser, the treatment is slightly faster.

Who is it for?

IPL has the same restrictions as laser in terms of effectiveness. It works best on people with dark hairs and light skin.

Laser danger

A number of people we spoke to expressed concern about the lack of uniform regulation of laser and intense pulsed light (IPL) hair removal.

Regulations vary according to the state or territory you live in and range from a fairly strict system in WA and Queensland, where a licence is required to use laser equipment, to a comparatively lax regime in NSW.

The Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA) is currently working on national guidelines to regulate the use of lasers in cosmetic procedures (including hair removal). These should be released for public comment in mid 2007. In the meantime, we recommend that you look for an experienced laser or IPL operator who works under medical supervision.

Possible risks and side effects

IPL lamps pose the same risks as lasers (see page 23). However, the lamps are more difficult to use than lasers and so even greater skill is required to operate them. As with lasers, we think IPLs require greater regulation and should only be operated under medical supervision.

Does it hurt?

The sensation is similar to laser treatment.

Cost

Usually a similar cost to laser, but the price varies greatly between different operators.

Waxing

What is it?

Wax is applied to the skin and a strip of cloth or paper is smoothed on top of it. The strip is then pulled away against the hair growth, taking the hairs with it.

It leads to slower regrowth than shaving (weeks not days) but there's no guarantee of permanent hair reduction.

Who is it for?

Waxing is suitable for all skin types and is good for large areas, such as the legs or back, as well as underarms and the bikini line.

Possible risks and side effects

There's a danger of skin infection if proper care isn't taken. In most states, salons that do waxing are regulated by legislation and may be inspected to ensure they comply with hygiene standards. Some general rules include:

- Wax shouldn't be applied to broken skin, sunburn or moles.
- Wax should preferably be in single-use pots for each client, and only disposable spatulas should be used.
- Waxing can also lead to ingrown hairs. You can help to reduce this by wearing loose clothing and avoiding showering or swimming in chlorinated pools immediately after waxing.
- Skin can be red after waxing, but this should only last for a few hours.

Does it hurt?

Many people find waxing to be quite painful. Women are advised to avoid waxing the week before and during menstruation, when the skin is more sensitive.

Cost

Varies depending on the area being waxed, but usually starts at around $12 for eyebrows and $20 for a half-leg wax.

Threading

What is it?

Threading involves an operator twisting and rolling a piece of cotton thread along the surface of the skin, entwining hair in the thread, which is then pulled out of the follicle. Some consider it to be a more effective method of shaping eyebrows evenly than waxing, and it's generally considered to be less painful too.

Cost

Around $25 for eyebrows. ■

Taken to the cleaners

Don't let just anyone loose on your carpets.

Muddy paw prints, a suspect smell and other unidentifiable splodges that just aren't coming out — if this sounds like your carpets at home it's probably time to have them professionally cleaned. In fact, it's recommended that you don't wait until your carpets are visibly dirty, as then they're already a haven for contaminants you've tracked in from outside. According to the Australian standard for carpet cleaning, you're recommended to have your carpets professionally cleaned once a year.

Choosing the right company

In the past when choosing a carpet-cleaning company, it was down to scouring the Yellow Pages, looking for the most attractive ad — a shot in the dark. Carpeting your home is no small investment, costing, on average, between $3000 and $6000 — so you want to be sure your carpet cleaner knows what they're doing. Start by asking friends if they've used a company they were impressed with. But whether they can suggest someone or not, you need to check for the right qualifications or training.

The carpet-cleaning industry is unregulated, so there's little incentive for carpet cleaners to receive formal training. Most of the time, an untrained carpet cleaner will have on-the-job experience and do a reasonable job — but if they're untrained *and* inexperienced, that's when problems can occur.

The NSW Department of Fair Trading received around 50 complaints about carpet cleaners in the last 12 months. The majority were complaints that the job wasn't done satisfactorily; a smaller percentage were allegations of damage caused in the cleaning process.

"A lot of carpet cleaners are unaware, because they've never had any formal training, that you can cause a lot of damage inadvertently," says one industry expert.

With the help of national trade associations (which provide training for their members and have a voluntary code of practice) and the internet, you should now be able to find a qualified professional relatively quickly, and be more confident they'll do a good job. Associations include the National Upholstery & Carpet Cleaners Association, the Australian Carpet Cleaning Institute and the Australian Restoration and Carpet Cleaning Association. See page 27 for contact details. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Not all carpet cleaners are created equal — some have training.**
- **If a price seems too good to be true, it probably is.**

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

< Training is important

Though the industry is unregulated, training is available. For many years the US Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification (IICRC) has offered in Australia internationally recognised certification for carpet cleaners. Recently here in Australia the Commonwealth Government certification system (Certificates II and III in Asset Maintenance — Carpet Cleaning) was introduced, which can be completed at registered training organisations and TAFE. Ask to see evidence of one of these types of certification.

Among other things, a qualified carpet technician has been trained in occupational health and safety, including appropriate chemical handling; how to use their equipment effectively to avoid mishaps like overwetting; and how to identify the appropriate chemical for both the type of carpet and type of stain.

The cleaner should be cleaning to the Australian standard, which is a non-mandatory guideline for carpet cleaning. If they're not familiar with the standard, cross them off your list.

Be prepared to pay

If you want a high quality of service, expect to pay for it. If the price is too low, chances are the job will be rushed or the cleaner will be inexperienced.

You'll almost certainly come across the old 'bait and switch' technique in the carpet-cleaning industry. It happens when a company charges a low price — as low as $5 a room — just to get their foot in your door. Once in your home, they try to convince you that you need extras such as sanitising, spot removal, etc, until you're paying well over the original quote.

The carpet cleaner should give you an estimate over the phone, but may need to inspect your carpet to firm it up. Make sure you give an adequate description of your entire house and say whether you have pets and if your carpets are stained.

Most carpet cleaners charge by the 'standard' room, which can be as low as $25. Others charge by the square metre, starting at around $4 per m^2. But as every job is different, there's no one-size-fits-all price. Never choose a carpet cleaner on price alone.

Included in the price should be basic spot removal, pre-vacuuming and moving furniture (with the exception of large or delicate items). Especially soiled carpets or stubborn stains may cost extra.

The company may also offer optional extras, such as deodorising, sanitising (meant to kill bacteria) and carpet protection (which forms a protective but not impenetrable layer on your carpet).

Some questions to ask

Before deciding on a company, ring at least three to make sure you're getting a professional level of service and a competitive price. Be prepared to ask some questions:

What guarantees do you offer?

Companies should offer a workmanship guarantee in writing. If you're not satisfied with the job or they've damaged your property, will they fix their mistakes or will they just stop answering your phone calls? A company that offers a 100% guarantee on their work is a good start.

No company can guarantee to remove 100% of stains — some, such as those that contain dyes, are unlikely to be removed without adversely affecting the carpet.

Going the extra mile

When Ben and his wife Tracey, from Sydney, were preparing to move into a rental property, they noted the carpet hadn't been cleaned by previous tenants. "The carpet had some noticeable pet hair and a pet smell so we insisted that it be cleaned," says Ben.

Their real estate agent organised a carpet cleaner, who arrived promptly and did a very professional job. "I was very happy with the result," says Ben. "He definitely got the smell and the hair out, which were our main concerns."

Weeks later, when their washing machine overflowed and flooded the carpet in the next room, Ben and Tracey were even more impressed. They called the carpet cleaner for his advice and he returned to their house to help them, free of charge. "He pulled up the carpet and left us with an industrial-sized fan. We just left that running for a couple of days with the windows open and that dried it out. We didn't hesitate to ring him again the next time our carpets needed a clean."

Do you have insurance?
The company should have public liability insurance to cover the cost of any damage done to your home.

How long will it take?
This will depend on the size of your home, the method used and how much furniture needs to be moved, but allow at least three hours.

Carpet drying time will also vary, but for hot water extraction (also known as steam cleaning), it shouldn't take longer than six to eight hours with proper ventilation. If it takes longer than 24 hours, too much water has been left in your carpet (see *Two days to dry*, below).

Dry or 'steam'?

The majority of carpet cleaners use either hot water extraction or dry cleaning.

Hot water extraction ('steam cleaning')
Hot water extraction is what the standard refers to as 'periodic or corrective cleaning', and is suitable for most carpets.

In this process, the carpet is vacuumed and then a chemical is sprayed onto it and left to bond with the soil. Afterwards water is injected into the carpet with a high-pressure jet spray and then vacuumed out. This can be done with a truck-mounted or portable machine. The former is much more powerful and will do a more thorough job.

Most carpet manufacturers recommend hot water extraction as the preferred method of carpet cleaning to invigorate and prolong the life of the carpet.

Dry cleaning
'Dry' cleaning (some water is used, though less than in hot water extraction) is what the standard refers to as 'surface cleaning'. It's handy for areas that receive a lot of traffic and need a fast drying time. There are many methods, but the most common is bonnet cleaning.

Bonnet cleaning involves vacuuming the carpet, applying the cleaning agent to the cleaner and sometimes the carpet, then going over the carpet with the cleaner. The cleaner has a pad (the bonnet), which rubs the carpet, transferring the dirt into the pad. Afterwards the carpet is thoroughly vacuumed. Drying time is quick — around one to two hours.

Dry cleaning can be used for maintenance but it's still best to have hot water extraction done from time to time.

DIY carpet cleaning

You can hire carpet cleaning machines from most Coles and Woolworths/Safeway supermarkets and some smaller independent stores; they work by hot water extraction. Carpet manufacturers often warn against doing it yourself, as there's more chance of overwetting the carpet, but you'll save money if that's an issue.

You also might not get the same results and it will take several hours of your time, but the upside is it will only cost you around $40 to hire the machine for 24 hours. The heavy-duty cleaning detergent will cost you around $11, the defoamer around $7 and spotter spray around $8.

With a DIY job, any damage done to your carpet is your own fault, so read and follow the instructions carefully. If you're having trouble making the machine work, you can call the machine's supplier to guide you through the steps. The major one we spoke to, Britex, has a hotline that's available seven days a week. ■

FOR MORE INFO

- **Australian Carpet Cleaning Institute: www.accinst.com.au.**
- **Australian Restoration and Carpet Cleaning Association: www.arcca.asn.au**
- **National Upholstery & Carpet Cleaners Association: www.nucca.asn.au.**
- **Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration certification: www.iicrc.org.**
- **Interactive Training Institute (which sells chemicals and equipment as well as providing training in using them): www.cleanology.com.au/training.php.**
- **Jena-Dyco (training school): www.jenadyco.com.**

Two days to dry

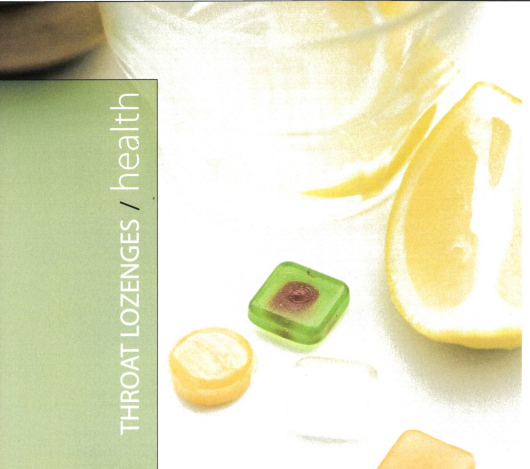
When choosing a company to have his carpets cleaned by hot water extraction ('steam cleaning'), Tim from Sydney chose a local one he found in the Yellow Pages. When they'd finished he was pleased with the job and handed over $200, with their assurance that his carpets would be dry in a matter of hours.

Two days later, Tim's carpets were still wet. "We had to walk around on plastic for two days and use blow heaters to dry the carpet, and dealing with a crawling baby on wet carpet was not easy," he says.

Unfortunately Tim didn't realise the company was at fault, assuming that his wool carpets were to blame for the lengthy dry-time. He only realised years later, when he used another company, that his carpets should have only taken two hours to dry. "I won't be using that company again, I've thrown the card away!" he says.

Overwetting isn't uncommon and can result in the growth of mould, water stains and brown stains from the carpet backing. The carpet may also shrink or crack and in extreme cases may need to be replaced.

If your carpets seem overly wet, ask the carpet cleaner to suck more water out if possible, and to lend you an industrial-strength blower to help them dry faster. They may also need to lift the carpet back so the underlay can dry. The company that caused the damage is responsible for rectifying the situation, but if you're having problems getting a result, contact your local fair trading or consumer affairs office. If the carpet cleaner is a member of an association, you can also contact it for assistance.



Relief or rip off?

Do throat lozenges help relieve a sore throat or are they just for suckers?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Most throat lozenges are unlikely to help relieve the pain and discomfort of a sore throat any more than sucking on a hard lolly or drinking hot water with honey and lemon.**
- **Products with anaesthetic or painkilling ingredients are your best bet for relieving the pain associated with a sore throat.**

Winter is just round the corner, and it's time to bring out the woollies and enjoy the cool, crisp mornings. Unfortunately it's also time to stock up on tissues and prepare for the chills, sniffles and, worst of all, sore throats that the change in weather inevitably brings.

Everyone who's had a sore throat knows how miserable it can make you feel — the dry, scratchy rawness and the pain when you swallow. It's easy enough to keep throat lozenges at hand, but do they help, or are we being sucked in?

Australians spend over $60 million each year on throat lozenges, and we're certainly well catered for — CHOICE's foray into supermarkets and pharmacies turned up around 60 different varieties. But when we looked at the evidence behind the ingredients it started to look as if we're largely wasting our money.

Lozenges that contain anaesthetic or analgesic (painkilling) ingredients are the most likely to help relieve symptoms associated with a sore throat, but you'll usually have to pay a bit more for ones with these ingredients (often over 50 cents per lozenge, compared with less than 10 cents per lozenge for non-medicated products). The rest of the lozenges are unlikely to be any more soothing than sucking on a hard lolly. See the table, pages 30–31, for a list of products and their key ingredients.

That said, simply sucking on a lozenge (or a lolly) can have a soothing effect by helping to lubricate the throat. And for the most part, non-medicated lozenges are relatively cheap, so if a particular product or flavour makes you feel better you might think it's worth it. But there are alternative ways of dealing with sore throats that you might find just as effective, and probably even cheaper.

Throat therapy

Taking paracetamol or aspirin (for adults) is an effective way to relieve the pain and discomfort of a sore throat. But if you'd rather not take any medication, the following might also help:

- Drink warm liquids. Hot water with honey and lemon is a time-tested remedy.
- Gargle with warm salt water (half a teaspoon of salt in one cup of water).
- Suck on ice.
- Use your air humidifier, if you have one.

A sore throat usually resolves itself within three to four days, and it's unusual for one to last beyond a week. If it persists, or your symptoms include severe difficulty swallowing or breathing, a fever or tender or swollen lymph glands in the neck, see your doctor.

What's in them?

Throat lozenges generally contain at least one of the following ingredients:

- **Anaesthetics** *Benzocaine, lignocaine hydrochloride.* Benzydamine hydrochloride (see *Painkillers*) and hexylresorcinol (see *Antibacterials*) also have local anaesthetic properties. Local anaesthetics numb the area they're in contact with and provide temporary relief from soreness. Lignocaine hydrochloride and benzocaine are used widely in

PHOTO: ISTOCK

medical and dental practice for locally numbing the mouth and throat for minor surgical procedures or when a tube must be inserted into the windpipe.

- **Painkillers** *Benzydamine hydrochloride, flurbiprofen.* These painkillers belong to the group known as NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) that help reduce swelling. A number of good-quality studies have shown that flurbiprofen lozenges and benzydamine hydrochloride given as a spray or gargle provide effective relief of sore throat symptoms, including difficulty in swallowing.
- **Antibacterials** *Amylmetacresol, cetylpyridinium chloride, dichlorobenzyl alcohol, hexylresorcinol.* As the name implies, antibacterials help fight against bacteria. But the majority of sore throats are caused by viral, not bacterial, infections (see *Sore throats: the causes*, right). So for the most part, antibacterials in lozenges aren't going to help. Lemsip even concedes this on its LEMSIP Max Sore Throat Anaesthetic Antibacterial Lozenges packaging: "The presence of the antibacterial agent in this product has not been shown to have beneficial effect on the severity or duration of a sore throat."
- **Antitussives (cough suppressants)** *Pholcodine, dextromethorphan hydrobromide.* Antitussives are intended to help suppress dry, unproductive coughs, which can contribute to making your throat sore. A Cochrane review (see page 31) of trials testing antitussives (mainly dextromethorphan), however, found that they appeared no more effective than a placebo for treating coughs in most cases. And a much higher concentration of dextromethorphan was used in the trials than is found in throat lozenges.
- **Menthol/peppermint** Menthol is made synthetically or obtained from mint oils — it's the component of peppermint oil that's thought to be responsible for most of its therapeutic properties. It gives a cooling and soothing sensation when you inhale or eat it due to its ability to chemically trigger cold-sensitive receptors in the skin. But the sensation of nasal decongestion from menthol is a subjective perception — studies show that although people feel decongested after inhaling menthol vapour, there's no actual improvement in the nasal airway when airflow is measured.
- **Eucalyptus** Just like menthol, eucalyptus is thought to act as a nasal decongestant. However there's a lack of controlled, clinical studies.
- **Pectin** It's commonly used as a thickening agent in foods like jam and jelly. In throat lozenges it's used to coat the throat, and in doing so has a soothing effect in much the same way as a teaspoon of honey.

Can they help your cold?

Many throat lozenges claim to have effects that extend beyond soothing a sore throat to the relief of cold and flu symptoms generally. They all have one or more of the following ingredients in common:

Sore throat: the causes

Most sore throats are caused by viruses, and cold and flu viruses are the main culprits. If your sore throat is a minor part of a typical cold (with a runny nose, blocked ears, cough and similar symptoms), it's likely to be caused by a viral infection. Viral sore throats are contagious and you can pass them on to someone by coughing and sneezing.

Sore throats can also be caused by infection by bacteria, most commonly streptococcus (this infection is referred to as 'strep throat'). Because strep throat can occasionally lead to rheumatic fever it's best treated with antibiotics, but it needs a lab test to accurately diagnose it. Viral sore throats, on the other hand, won't respond to antibiotics.

Not all sore throats are caused by infection. Hay fever and other allergies may irritate the sinuses, causing post-nasal drip (drainage that runs down the back of your throat) and irritation, especially at night. Low humidity, smoking and air pollution can all make the throat sore. And people who breathe through their mouth at night because of nasal congestion often get a sore throat that improves as the day progresses.

- **Echinacea** It's thought to help boost the immune system and alleviate symptoms of the common cold. Its preparations can differ greatly depending on the type and parts of the plant used and the manufacturing methods, however, and the overwhelming majority of products haven't been tested in clinical trials. It's not clear from the labels what extraction method or part of the plant was used for the echinacea in the throat lozenges in our sample that contain it.

A Cochrane review of trials investigating the effectiveness of echinacea for preventing and treating common colds found that some preparations might be effective for the early treatment of colds in adults, but results aren't consistent. Beneficial effects of other preparations might exist but haven't been shown in good-quality trials.

- **Vitamin C (ascorbic acid)** appears in throat lozenges in various forms, including sodium ascorbate and calcium ascorbate dihydrate. It's thought that it can help reduce the duration of the common cold. But a Cochrane review of vitamin C found that the trials in which it was introduced at the onset of colds as therapy didn't show any benefit in doses up to 4 g daily. The dose of vitamin C in individual throat lozenges in our sample ranged from just 10 mg to as much as 100 mg.
- **Zinc** It's thought to reduce symptoms of the common cold, including a sore throat. A 1999 >

< Cochrane review concluded that evidence was inconclusive as to whether zinc lozenges were an effective treatment for symptoms of the common cold. Since then several new studies have shown that treatment with zinc lozenges significantly decreased cold duration.

It's likely that the results are conflicting because the dose and formulation of the zinc used has an influence over effectiveness, and these things differed between trials. Zinc in the lozenges in our sample is from zinc gluconate at a dose of up to 3.2 mg per lozenge. The dosage of zinc (from zinc gluconate) used in the trials, effective or not, ranged from 13.3 to 23 mg. ■

Suckers for kids

We found two lozenge-type products specifically for kids — the homeopathic KIDS COLD Raspberry Flavoured Lozenges On A Stick and KIDS COUGH Orange Flavoured Lozenges On A Stick. Homeopathy follows the premise of treating the sick with extremely diluted agents that, in undiluted doses, produce similar symptoms in healthy people.

The KIDS COUGH product claims to provide "temporary relief of sore throat, wheezing, congestion, hoarseness, cough". We asked the distributor of these lozenges for evidence to support its product's efficacy, but the response — that the "ingredients used to make claims are all based on therapeutic levels" — didn't enlighten us much.

Lozenges and hard lollies in general shouldn't be given to young children as there's a risk of choking. There's also a lack of evidence that throat lozenges give effective pain relief and concerns about their potential toxicity (related to anaesthetic ingredients in particular).

When kids are older, sucking on a lozenge might help them feel better. But for safety and dietary reasons make sure dosage instructions are followed. Sugary lozenges, like sugary lollies, can contribute to the development of dental decay, so avoid handing them out like sweets.

PRODUCT	INGREDIENTS										
	Medications				Other ingredients				For colds		
Throat lozenges (in alphabetical order within groups)	Anaesthetics	Painkillers	Antibacterials	Cough suppressant	Eucalyptus oil	Menthol	Peppermint oil	Pectin	Echinacea	Vitamin C	Zinc
Products most likely to relieve a sore throat											
Amcal Anti-inflammatory Menthol & Eucalyptus (A)	✓	✓	✓								
Cepacol Cough+ Cough Suppressant Lemon	✓		✓	✓		✓					
Cepacol Plus Anaesthetic & Antibacterial Blackcurrant	✓		✓								
Cepacol Plus Anaesthetic & Antibacterial Original	✓		✓								
Difflam Anti-inflammatory Anti-bacterial Doublemint (A)		✓	✓								
Difflam Anti-inflammatory Anti-bacterial Eucalyptus & Menthol (A)		✓	✓		✓	✓					
Difflam Anti-inflammatory Anti-bacterial Honey Lemon (A)		✓	✓								
Difflam Anti-inflammatory Anti-bacterial Orange (A)		✓	✓								
Difflam Anti-inflammatory Anti-bacterial Raspberry (A)		✓	✓								
Difflam Anti-inflammatory with Cough Suppressant Blackcurrant (A)		✓	✓	✓							
Lemsip Max Sore Throat Anaesthetic Antibacterial Menthol & Honey	✓		✓								
Strepfen Anti-inflammatory		✓									
Strepfen Anti-inflammatory Orange (A)		✓									
Strepsils Extra Blackcurrant	✓		✓								
Strepsils +Plus Anaesthetic	✓		✓								
Products least likely to relieve a sore throat											
Amcal Echinacea, Zinc + C									✓	✓	✓
Anticol I.C.E. Intense Cooling Effect Eucalyptus & Menthol					✓	✓					
Anticol Throaties					✓	✓					
Anticol Vapour Action					✓	✓				✓	

PRODUCT	INGREDIENTS										
	Medications				Other ingredients				For colds		
Throat lozenges (in alphabetical order within groups)	Anaesthetics	Painkillers	Antibacterials	Cough suppressant	Eucalyptus oil	Menthol	Peppermint oil	Pectin	Echinacea	Vitamin C	Zinc
Products least likely to relieve a sore throat, continued											
Bioglan Therapeutic Throat-Clear Herbal Antibiotic Pastille (A) (B)					✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Blackmores Echinacea Citrus					✓				✓	✓	
Butter-Menthol Echinacea									✓	✓	
Butter-Menthol Honey-Centre						✓				✓	
Butter-Menthol						✓				✓	
Cepacol Antibacterial Eucalyptus & Menthol			✓		✓	✓					
Cepacol Antibacterial Honey & Lemon			✓								
Cepacol Antibacterial Orange Citrus			✓								
Duro-Tuss Cough Lozenges Lemon (A)			✓	✓							
Duro-Tuss Cough Lozenges Orange (A)			✓	✓							
Easeacold Sore Throat + Congestion Natural Antibiotic Pastilles (B)					✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Easeacold Sore Throat + Cough & Congestion Natural Orange (B)						✓					
Fisherman's Friend Menthol with Aniseed						✓					
Fisherman's Friend Apple Spice Fruity (A)						✓					
Fisherman's Friend Super Strong Mint						✓	✓				
Lemsip First Signs Cold & Flu Citrus					✓				✓	✓	
Lemsip Sore Throat Antibacterial Natural Lemon			✓								
Natralia Echinacea with Eucalyptus Oil Flavour					(C)				✓		
Robitussin Extra Strength Throat Calmers Menthol Eucalyptus					(C)	✓					
Robitussin Honey Cough Natural Cough Drops Herbal Menthol						✓					
Soothers Blackcurrant					✓	✓				✓	
Soothers Eucalyptus & Menthol					✓	✓				✓	
Soothers Honey & Lemon					✓	✓				✓	
Soothers Liquid Centres Lemon & Lime					✓	✓				✓	
Soothers Liquid Centres Orange & Mango					✓	✓				✓	
Soothers Smoothers Mixed Berry Pectin								✓			
Strepsils Dry Cough				✓							
Strepsils Eucalyptus & Menthol			✓		(C)	✓					
Strepsils Honey & Lemon			✓								
Strepsils Orange			✓								
Strepsils Strawberry (A)			✓								
Strepsils Lemon Flavour (A)			✓								
Strepsils Vitamin C & Zinc, Blackcurrant										✓	✓
Strepsils Vitamin C with Echinacea, Honey & Eucalyptus					(C)				✓	✓	
Vicks Blue						✓	✓				
Vicks Vapodrops Butter Menthol						✓					
Vicks Vapodrops Fresh Peppermint						✓	✓				
Vicks Vapodrops Original Menthol					✓	✓					

WHAT'S A COCHRANE REVIEW?

Cochrane reviews are systematic reviews of healthcare-related research reports on particular topics that have been published in hundreds of journals around the world. They explore the evidence for and against the effectiveness and appropriateness of treatments (medications, surgery, education, etc) in specific circumstances. They differ from other systematic reviews in that they use a predefined explicit methodology, and they're updated regularly. They're known internationally as sources of high-quality, reliable health information.

(A) Sugar-free.
(B) Contains herbal ingredients in addition to those listed.
(C) Flavour only.

Alternative to a reverse mortgage

BENDIGO BANK and HOMESAFE SOLUTIONS are offering a contract called Debt Free Equity Release that lets people aged 60 and over sell up to 60% ($25,000–$500,000) of the predicted future value of their home to BENDIGO/HOMESAFE. Currently it's only available in greater Melbourne and Sydney.

You can receive the amount only as a lump sum; there's a $1290 setup cost and no ongoing fees. The title remains in your name and you can live in the house until you sell, permanently move (such as into long-term aged care) or die. As this isn't a loan you don't have to pay interest and the remaining percentage of the sale price will always belong to you/your estate.

How much BENDIGO/HOMESAFE pays you for a share in the future value of your home depends on the company's projections of your life expectancy and the property growth rate.

If you sell the house earlier than expected and/or it grows in value more than expected, you receive a rebate when you/your estate sell the house.

As with a reverse mortgage it's important to:

- Consider alternatives and your future needs: could you buy a smaller home instead? Will you have enough money left if you want to move into a retirement home?
- Look at the product features: would a reverse mortgage that allows you to receive regular payments instead of a lump sum suit you better? It's very difficult to evaluate the two options against each other and many people would be best to get independent financial advice.
- You also need independent legal advice.
- Contact Centrelink Financial Information Service (phone 13 23 00) to make sure your pension isn't negatively affected.

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM IDENTITY THEFT

Identity theft is the misuse of your personal details to commit fraud. This can have serious financial consequences — as it did for John and Sarah (not their real names).

They applied for a home loan after finding a house they loved and could afford. But the bank refused to give them the loan, citing John's credit history as the reason. He was mystified, but it turned out that the bad credit report was a result of the theft of his wallet four years earlier. A criminal had used the information and identity documents in the wallet to obtain credit cards in John's name and purchased a range of items. The overdue accounts were noted on John's credit report.

There are ways to protect yourself from identity theft:

- Only carry personal documents with you if you really need them, to minimise the damage if your wallet or bag is stolen.
- Sometimes businesses ask for large amounts of information they don't really need for the transaction you're making with them. If you can't see why they need to know something, ask, and don't provide the information if it isn't necessary.
- Don't give personal information to someone you don't know or trust.
- Destroy personal information such as bills by tearing, cutting up or shredding them.
- Check you've received all the bills and statements you'd normally expect. A missing letter could indicate a thief took it from your letterbox or changed your billing address.

And check your credit report at least once a year. Credit reporting agencies should provide you with a free copy of your credit file. There are two national credit reference agencies — you need to contact both:

- Veda Advantage: phone 1300 762 207 or www.mycreditfile.com.au.
- Dun & Bradstreet: phone 13 23 33 or www.dnb.com.au.
- If you live or have ever lived in Tasmania, also contact Tasmanian Collection Service at www.tascol.com.au.

For more information about identity theft you can get a free copy of *ID theft — Dealing with Identity Theft*: contact your local consumer affairs or fair trading office or download it from www.crimeprevention.gov.au.

Turning back the pizza clock

Fast-food pizza has come a long way from its relatively healthy origins in Italy, and now scientists are having a go at making it healthier again. Food chemists at the University of Maryland in the US have developed a way of increasing the antioxidant levels in a pizza base made from whole-wheat flour by increasing the baking temperature and doubling the baking time. They've also found that the longer the dough is left to rise before baking while the yeast in it ferments (up to 48 hours), the more antioxidants are bound in.

Increasing the antioxidants is fine, but not if they're in a pizza that's full of fat, salt and kilojoules — any benefit would be negated by loading the base with fattening toppings. The healthiest pizza topping has lots of vegies and a little cheese, and goes with a thin base, preferably made from whole-wheat flour.

If you're wondering who sponsored the research, it wasn't the pizza industry — but it was some other groups with a vested interest: the US Department of Agriculture and some grains organisations.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

Sugar is sugar is sugar

An eagle-eyed CHOICE reader sent us a packet of YUMMIEES' Natural Fruit Jellies, dubious about the claims made on the packaging. If you missed the 'natural' in the name, there's no missing the 'natural flavours', 'natural colours' and 'no added cane sugar' claims on the packet.

But 'natural' is irrelevant to nutrition in this case. The main ingredient of this product is apple fruit syrup — which is still a source of sugar, and the product itself is over 60% sugar. Just because it's sourced from a fruit and not cane sugar doesn't make it any better for you. It still results in empty kilojoules that'll make you fat if you don't exercise them off, and is still bad news for your teeth.

FUNDING AFFECTS STUDY OUTCOMES

One of the founding values of CHOICE is our independence — we don't need or take funding from manufacturers or any other group because we're funded by our subscribers. But sadly, that's not always how scientific tests are carried out.

A new report has found that clinical nutrition trials fully funded by industry sponsorship are four to eight times more likely to be favourable to the interests of the sponsors than trials without industry-related funding. The study looked at over 200 scientific papers based on studies of non-alcoholic beverages, such as milk, soft drink and juices.

Of even more concern was the observation that when interventional studies (studies that investigate the safety and/or efficacy of something on humans, such as drugs or procedures) were wholly industry-funded, they *all* had a conclusion favourable to the sponsor.

The moral of the story is that as with all research, check who sponsored any study being quoted in marketing or advertising.

And for nutrition information generally, don't rely on the results of any one study — nutrition knowledge is built up over time after much research.

Local talent time

Australia's been producing some great wines for a long time — now it's olive oil's turn to take the limelight. When CHOICE last tested extra-virgin olive oils three years ago we found only two brands of Australian oil on the supermarket shelves; now there are more than 20.

Driven by consumer demand and helped along by some tax incentives, production has increased dramatically in quantity and quality. In this test, four of the top six extra-virgin olive oils are local products.

On average, though, the oils imported from Europe were cheaper. This is partly because of economies of scale, but also because production of olive oil is subsidised by the European Union.

Taste expectations

Good-quality extra-virgin olive oils have a rich and subtle range of flavours. They can have a pleasant bitterness and pepperiness when the olives are picked and processed before they're fully ripe, or milder ripe fruit flavours when the oil is extracted from riper olives.

Our expert tasters looked for these complexities of flavour, and also for the absence of negative characteristics like rancidity, which could mean the oil is stale or hasn't been stored correctly.

While none of the 28 mass-produced (not boutique) oils is in the gold medal class (for that it would need to score 17 or more out of 20 using the Australian Olive Oil Association's scoring system), we think you'd be happy with the top six (see *What to buy*, far right), which all scored between 13.5 and 15.5 (bronze or silver).

Not always fresh

Extra-virgin olive oil is at its best when it's fresh, and even under ideal storage conditions it deteriorates with time and should be used within about a year of its production. Australian oils should have the edge here because, at least in theory, they get from producer to consumer in less time.

Unfortunately some of the oils in our test, including one locally produced one, were showing signs of deterioration. The tasters identified rancidity and other off flavours that suggest lack of freshness (see the table, page 37, for details), and these assessments were confirmed by chemical tests.

The UV absorbence test, which highlights aging of the oil, gave results outside the limits specified by the International Olive Oil Council for the tasted samples of CAPARELLI FIRENZE, COLAVITA and LUPI (all imported oils); other samples of these brands were borderline, as was PADTHAWAY ESTATE, an Australian oil.

Current labelling requirements don't help you choose the freshest oils. Most brands have only a vague 'best before' date. That date is in any case at the discretion of the producer or importer, or they can choose not to give any date at all on the label. In Europe 'best by' dates are a maximum of two years after the oil was packed, although the oil can be a blend from different years and may have been held in a tank for extended periods of time before it was bottled. We'd like to see the date of production on the label, so you'd know exactly how old the oil is.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Of the six olive oils that rated highest, four were produced in Australia. Extra-virgin olive oils are at their best when they're fresh, which should give Australian products the edge over European imports.
- CHOICE wants all bottles of extra-virgin olive oil to have the date of production on the label — then you'd know which ones are really fresh.

Jargon buster

Like wine, olive oil has so many nuances that international experts have devised special terms to explain the distinctions. Here are some examples that might help you interpret the tasters' comments in the table on page 37.

- **Bitter, pungent** In moderation only, these are pluses, providing what the experts call 'bite'.
- **Finish** It's a measure of how long a flavour lingers in the mouth. Oils that are showing staleness can leave a fatty sensation in the mouth after tasting.
- **Fruity** A high-quality oil may have the flavour and aroma of ripe olives or tropical fruits. Or it can have a 'green olive' character, with flavours and aromas reminiscent of grass, vegetables, herbs, green banana or green apple. Some oils have elements of both green and ripe fruit.
- **Muddy** Before bottling, oil is stored in tanks or vats. If these hold leftover sediment, the oil can take on a flavour that's a bit suggestive of salami or parmesan cheese.
- **Musty** This is an off flavour caused by the olives having been stored too long after harvesting. Ideally they should be processed into oil within 24 hours.
- **Rancid, tired** This off flavour, ranging from slight staleness to obvious rancidity, indicates a product that's been on the shelf too long or was stored poorly.
- **Robust** Oils described in this way have strong bitterness and/or pungency (pepper). They're usually made from greener olives and typically (but not always) have herbaceous aromas and flavours.

What's in a name?

'Virgin' simply means the oil has been extracted from olives by a mechanical process without the use of excessive heat or any form of additives or solvents. (You can extract more oil from olives if you heat them, but the quality suffers.) 'Extra-virgin' oil also has low acidity (0.8% or less) and should comply with other technical specifications as well as being free from taste defects.

'Extra-virgin' is nonetheless a broad term in Australia; some extra-virgin olive oils can be rather bland while others have outstanding aroma and flavour. And some of the oils in our test had significant faults and don't really deserve the extra-virgin label. Extra-virgin status isn't regulated here under the Food Standards Code. CHOICE wants to see it become regulated so consumers can't continue to be fobbed off with substandard products.

Italian oil has a special kudos, but don't assume that an Italian name on the label means you're getting 100% Italian oil. Four of the oils in our test that were labelled as imported from Italy were blends that included oils produced in other countries (see the table for details).

Beware of 'lite'

'Lite' (or 'light') olive oil doesn't have less fat or fewer kilojoules; it's just light in aroma, flavour and colour. 'Pure' or 'light' olive oils have been refined. Refining usually involves a combination of physical (mainly heat) and chemical processes; they neutralise the acid and bleach and deodorise the oil, leaving a bland oil with no distinctive aroma, colour or taste. A small >

WHAT TO BUY

PNOE Breath of Life Classic (500 mL)	$8.99
WOOLWORTHS Select Australian (500 mL)	$7.19
DANDARAGAN Select Fruity (375 mL)	$7.49
DICK SMITH'S (500 mL)	$7.66
JINGILLI Devine (500 mL)	$8.99
ALWAYS FRESH Spanish (500 mL)	$7.29

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

Current labelling requirements don't help you choose the freshest oils. Most brands have only a vague 'best before' date. That date is in any case at the discretion of the producer or importer, or they can choose not to give any date on the label at all.

OLIVE OIL DULLS THE PAIN?

Scientists have discovered a naturally occurring substance in extra-virgin olive oil that has the same pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory properties as the painkiller ibuprofen. But, sadly, olive oil won't cure a headache — you'd need to swallow half a kilogram of oil to get the same benefits as a dose of ibuprofen.

< percentage of virgin oil is then mixed with the oil to give it some flavour. The refining process also removes the antioxidants and other phytochemicals, so these oils aren't as healthy as extra-virgin.

However, these cheaper refined oils can be heated to higher temperatures than other vegetable oils without smoking, and so can be handy for frying. A good extra-virgin olive oil loses some of its flavour if you fry with it — the choice is yours.

The health angle

Since 2004, food manufacturers in the US have been allowed to claim that you can reduce the risk of heart disease by replacing saturated fats with olive oil, which is the main source of fat in the healthy traditional 'Mediterranean' diet. It's rich in monounsaturated fatty acids, which are recommended as the best replacement for saturated fats.

But extra-virgin olive oil is more than a source of healthy fatty acids: it contains hundreds of different micronutrients, especially antioxidants, that give health benefits. For example, olive oil may help protect us against various forms of cancer, especially of the breast and stomach. ■

HOW WE TESTED

- Our expert tasters tried 28 olive oils, all labelled extra-virgin and all available in supermarkets. We excluded flavoured oils, and where a brand has more than one type, in most cases we asked the manufacturer which was the most popular and tasted only that one.
- The experts tasted the oils (without knowing the brands) and agreed on a score, following the Australian Olive Oil Association's 20-point system. When an oil had an obvious fault they tasted a second bottle. The panel also commented on the freshness and flavour of each oil, and the tasters' comments in the table are compiled from what they said.
- We also tested the oils chemically to check their freshness and see if they complied with the International Olive Oil Council's definition of 'extra-virgin' (see *What's in a name?*, page 35).

Meet the experts

We're very grateful to our panel of experts, who subjected their palates to an onslaught of oil. They were (from left to right):

- **Richard Gawel: Olive oil taste consultant and blender, Recognose.**
- **Peter Olson: NSW Department of Primary Industries, and panel leader of the Australian Olive Oil Sensory Panel.**
- **Margi Kirkby: Oil producer, taster, blender and consultant. She's also involved with Gwydir Grove olive oil.**
- **Wendy Ambler: Boutique olive oil and wine producer, Chalkers Crossing.**
- **Jayne Bentivoglio: Rylstone Olive Press and member of the Australian Olive Oil Panel (Wagga Wagga).**
- **Robert Armstrong: Boutique olive oil producer and director, Nicholas Foods.**

Product	Score	Origin	Bottle size (mL)	Price per litre ($)	Tasters' comments
Pnoe Breath of Life Classic	15.5	Greece	500	17.98	Fresh grassy and fruity aroma; slightly lingering bitterness. Nice oil.
Woolworths Select Australian	14.5	Australia	500	14.38	Good flavour; sweet fruit finish. Reasonably balanced oil; robust.
Dandaragan Select Fruity	14	Australia	375	19.97	Good artichoke/green apple flavour; firm pungency. A delicate, everyday all-round oil.
Dick Smith's	14	Australia	500	15.32	Banana and spicy aroma; firm pungency, and leaves a peppery finish. A pleasant oil.
Jingilli Devine	14	Australia	500	17.98	Good fresh herbaceous aromas; intense peppery finish. A robust oil.
Always Fresh Spanish	13.5	Spain	500	14.58	A sweeter, riper oil with good intense flavours. Moderate bitterness.
Always Fresh Australian	12.5	Australia	375	13.20	Grassy nose; little olive character but finishes with mild pungency and stronger bitterness.
Aurora Medaglia D'Oro	12.5	Spain	500	12.58	Strong varietal influence (picual) with ripe fruit aromas; heavy bitterness and pungency.
Cobram Estate Murray Valley	12.5	Australia	375	15.97	Grassy nose with some green banana character; slightly tired.
Currawong Mild and Fruity	12.5	Australia	500	17.98	Slight herbaceous and apple aroma; a bit buttery to taste. OK, but lacking fruit definition.
Olive Grove Australian	12.5	Australia	250	19.96	Ripe tomato/floral nose; rather tired, fatty palate.
Red Island	12.5	Australia	250	21.96	Herbaceous aroma; hint of bitterness and pungency. Good persistence of flavour.
Borges	12	Spain	500	12.50	Typical ripe fruit (picual) aroma; a touch tired.
Moro	12	Spain	500	17.98	Strong varietal (picual) characteristics; sweet, ripe aroma. Lingering bitterness.
Ollo Mild & Mellow	12	Australia	500	17.98	Fresh, herbaceous nose; musty palate. Reasonable oil.
Altis Traditional	11.5	Greece	500	13.14	Bland aroma with a slightly peppery finish.
Carapelli Firenze	11.5	Italy (A)	500	9.58	Very ripe tropical 'Spanish' character; moderate bitterness and pepper. Tired oil; lacks complexity.
Tree of Life Mild	11.5	Australia	500	15.98	Ripe fruit aromas; weak flavours, lacking freshness.
Viva Late Harvest	11.5	Australia	375	11.07	Woody, dried character on palate. Lacks fruity aroma; fairly bitter taste.
Bertolli	11	Italy (A)	500	15.10	Tired and lacking in fruit or freshness; slight bitterness on palate.
Home Brand	11	Spain	500	9.84	Very ripe, tropical fruit character. Pungent and unbalanced.
Auslio Green Label	10.5	Australia	500	17.98	Woody on nose; tired on palate.
Carlini	10.5	Italy (A)	750	8.39	Strong varietal influence (picual); tropical guava nose; some metallic bitterness.
Vetta	10	Spain	500	14.92	Tropical fruit aroma with rancidity.
Lupi	9.5	Italy (A)	500	12.54	Tired and rancid.
Padthaway Estate	9.5	Australia	500	23.38	Slightly muddy, ripe fruit nose; linseed oil character, rancid.
Borges Organic Farming	9	Spain	500	14.98	Muddy, very bitter, metallic.
Colavita	9	Italy	500	19.98	Low on fruit; buttery mouthfeel. Some bitterness and hint of rancidity.

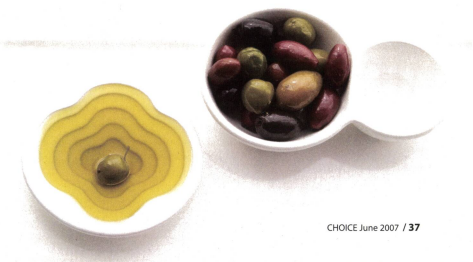
USING THE TABLE

Score Tasters used the Australian Olive Oil Association's 20-point scale. Under it, a gold medal score is 17 or higher, a silver medal 15–16.5 and a bronze 13–14.5.

Prices are per litre for comparison, based on what we paid in supermarkets for the bottle size in the table in January 2007.

Tasters' comments 'Picual' is a variety of olive with particular characteristics that's widely grown in Spain. Many Spanish oils are described as 'picual' as they have a very distinguishable aroma and flavour profile, different from what experts would expect to see coming out of Italy, for example.

(A) "Blended and bottled in Italy from imported and local olive oils."



A lot of hot air?

A reverse-cycle air conditioner's a good way to heat a room as well as cool it — if you're feeling the winter chill in your bedroom or even a not-too-large living room, one of these smaller inverter models could be ideal for all seasons. Compared with other electric heating, they're cheap and efficient to run.

Inverter air conditioners, unlike older-style models, can vary their heating or cooling output to correspond with room conditions. This is more energy-efficient than older models, which either operate at 100% of their capacity or they're off.

Our test method takes this into account, and in that way it's different from the one used by some manufacturers for energy label testing. To pass the energy label test, the Australian standard allows manufacturers to fix the compressor speed at a certain 'rated' capacity. We think this is unrealistic, as an inverter air conditioner will never operate in such a fixed mode in real life. And when subjected to our more realistic test, four out of the nine tested air cons (the DELONGHI, FUJITSU, MITSUBISHI and TOSHIBA) had significantly lower heating efficiency than the one given on their labels.

That doesn't mean these models are necessarily inefficient or poor performers — most of the tested models provide more than 3 kW of cooling or heating for each kW of electricity they use. The issue is that you should be able to rely on the energy label that reverse-cycle air cons must display to tell you their cooling and heating capacity and how energy-efficient they are. It's an essential tool for you to compare models, but in CHOICE's view the current tests manufacturers can put their models through don't always match reality and help you make an informed decision.

We passed on our findings to the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO), which polices the energy label.

Consider this

- **Do you need an air conditioner?** Before you spend big on an air con, try to make your home more energy-efficient — for example, by installing ceiling insulation, providing shading for windows, and draughtproofing windows and doors. At best, this will mean you can get by without an air conditioner for cooling (perhaps ceiling fans will do the job — we're planning to bring

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: nine split-system, reverse-cycle inverter air conditioners with claimed capacities of around 3.5 kW for cooling and about 4 kW for heating. They're suitable for a large bedroom or small living area.**
- **Air conditioners are the most efficient form of electric heating.**

what to buy

While the FUJITSU is the best model overall and by far the best choice for cooling, it may not be for you if you're planning to use your air conditioner as the main source of heating too. In that situation the DAIKIN and PANASONIC would be a better choice. The FUJITSU and DAIKIN are particularly quiet indoors.

FUJITSU ASTA12LCC / AOTR12LCC

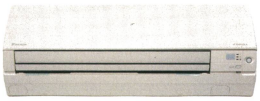
Price $1510

Good points

- By far the best cooling efficiency.
- Best airflow range.
- The easiest to use.
- Comparatively quiet indoors.

Bad points

- Its heating efficiency was the worst in the test, mainly because under our test conditions it was the only model to go through a defrost cycle (which increases power consumption).
- Comparatively noisy outdoor unit.
- One of the more expensive in the test.



DAIKIN FTXS35EVMA / RXS35EVMA

Price $1350

Good points

- Very good heating efficiency.
- Good cooling efficiency.
- Very good airflow range.
- Comparatively quiet indoors and outdoors.
- Comparatively low running costs.
- Five fan speeds.

Bad points

- One of the more expensive in the test.

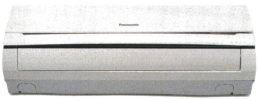
you test results for those later this year). At worst, it means you can make do with a smaller model and run it less often.

- **Which type? Portable** models, which are generally for cooling only, can be moved from room to room, and from house to house. But they're usually only suitable for cooling relatively small areas. CHOICE will be testing some portable models later this year. **Window/wall** units are comparatively cheap to buy, but generally not as efficient as and noisier than **split systems,** which consist of an outdoor unit that sits outside your home and contains all the noisy bits needed to condition the air, and — connected by a hose — an indoor unit (or several) that's installed on a wall and blows the conditioned air into your room.
- **Efficiency** This tells you how many kilowatts (kW) of cooling or heating an air conditioner provides per kW of electricity it uses. The more efficient it is, the lower the running costs and greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Airflow** The air conditioner's fan circulates the cooled or heated air around the room. Ideally, you want a model with a wide airflow range and multiple fan speeds: from very high to help the room cool down or heat up quickly, to very low so there's less noise and no unpleasant draught once you have the right temperature — especially if you're using the air conditioner in your bedroom.

The AIRWELL, DELONGHI and DIMPLEX don't move as much air as the others on their highest fan setting, while the lowest fan setting on the DELONGHI moves a lot more air than on the others — and that makes it noisier too.

- **Noise** A noisy indoor unit may interfere with your conversation, radio, TV — or sleep. And most local councils have noise restrictions relating to the use of air conditioners: check before you buy, especially if the outdoor unit has to be installed close to your neighbour. >

PANASONIC



PANASONIC CSE12FKR / CUE12FKR

Price $1449

Good points

- The best heating efficiency.
- Good cooling efficiency.
- Very good airflow range.
- The cheapest to run.
- Five fan speeds.
- Comparatively low running costs.

Bad points

- No 'fan only' mode.
- One of the more expensive in the test.

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

about the rest

- The MITSUBISHI has good cooling efficiency and airflow and is comparatively quiet indoors, but isn't a particularly good choice for heating.
- The other models aren't as efficient at cooling a room, have a more limited airflow range and aren't as easy to use as those in the *What to buy* list. However, they're all cheaper.

WANT MORE INFO?

At choice.com.au you can read our articles on heating and cooling options, including calculators that help you estimate the heating and cooling capacity required for your room(s). Type 'heating options' or 'cooling options' in the search box.

Inverter air conditioners, unlike older-style models, can vary their heating or cooling output to correspond with room conditions. This is more energy-efficient than older models, which either operate at 100% of their capacity or they're off.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE						MAXIMUM CAPACITY (kW)		FEATURES				
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Cooling efficiency score (%)	Heating efficiency score (%)	Airflow score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Noise, indoor* / outdoor	Cooling	Heating	Fan only mode	Real-time clock	Fan speeds	Fast operation	Quiet operation
Fujitsu ASTA12LCC / AOTR12LCC	82	91	61	90	89	Quieter / noisier	3.58	5.06	✓	✓	3		✓
Daikin FTXS35EVMA / RXS35EVMA (A)	79	78	80	83	76	Quieter / quieter	3.35	4.04	✓	✓	5	✓	✓
Panasonic CSE12FKR / CUE12FKR	78	73	82	81	82	Medium / medium	3.37	4.61		✓	5	✓	✓
Mitsubishi MSGGA35VA / MUZGA35VA (B)	75	73	69	88	77	Quieter / noisier	2.78	3.90		✓	4		
Electrolux ESD12HRA	70	68	75	67	68	Medium / medium	3.78	4.56	✓		3	✓ (C)	
Toshiba RAS13NKVA2 / RAS13NAVA2	70	65	70	75	76	Quieter / medium	3.35	4.46	✓	✓	5	✓	✓
Dimplex DSAC12HRDCI	67	66	70	66	62	Medium / medium	3.72	4.48	✓		3		
Airwell XV12RCA / GCXV12RCA	65	59	70	69	65	Medium / medium	3.26	3.76	✓	✓	3		
DeLonghi CPI306AUINA / CPI306AUEXU	58	58	64	50	59	Noisier / medium	3.73	4.46	✓		3		

what to look for

- **Size matters** To get the most from an air conditioner, match its cooling (and, if required, heating) capacity to your room. Try the CHOICE cooling and heating calculators to determine the right size for your home (see *Want more info?*, page 39).
- **Energy efficiency** Once you've worked out what capacity you need, compare the star ratings of models of similar capacity — the more stars the better. Note that star ratings are different for heating and cooling.
- **Automatic de-icing** If you live in a cold area, frost may build up on the outdoor heat exchanger coils in winter if the air conditioner doesn't have this function (all the tested ones do).

Common features

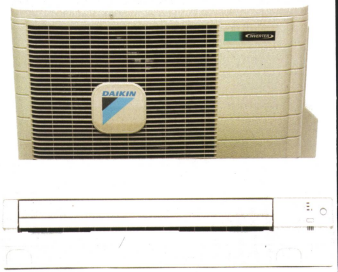
- A **timer** lets you switch the air conditioner on and/or off automatically at certain times, and all the tested models have one. However, there are big differences:

The DELONGHI has the most limited one: you can only program one 'on' or one 'off' switch, and as it doesn't have a real-time clock you can't program an actual time, only an interval. For example, you can program it to switch off in two hours from now.

The DIMPLEX and ELECTROLUX allow you to program one 'on' and one 'off' time per day, but only as an interval as they don't have a real-time clock.

All the others let you program actual 'on' and 'off' times.

- **Remote control.**
- **Operating modes Auto** Automatically chooses the mode required to keep the room at the chosen temperature. **Cool** Pumps



The outdoor unit (at the back in the photo) contains all the noisy bits needed to condition the air, and is connected by a hose to the indoor part that's mounted on a wall. If the outdoor unit is too loud it can annoy your neighbours; if the indoor bit is noisy it'll drive *you* mad.

SPECIFICATIONS		COSTS	
Dimensions, indoor unit (H x W x D, cm)	Contact	Running cost, 10 years ($)	Price ($)
28 x 79 x 22	www.fujitsugeneral.com.au	1850	1510
29 x 80 x 20	www.daikin.com.au	1770	1350 (D)
28 x 80 x 19	www.panasonic.com.au	1710	1449
30 x 78 x 21	www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au	1980	1618
29 x 81 x 22	www.electrolux.com.au	1860	1109
28 x 78 x 22	www.toshiba-aircon.com.au	1930	1099
27 x 79 x 20	www.dimplex-australia.com	1910	1199
25 x 84 x 18	www.airwell.com.au	1900	1199
29 x 83 x 23	www.delonghi.com.au	1940	1099

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Cooling efficiency: 40%
- Heating efficiency: 30%
- Airflow: 20%
- Ease of use: 10%

We weighted cooling efficiency higher than heating efficiency because reverse-cycle air conditioners are more often used for cooling than heating in Australia.

Measured capacity Reverse-cycle air conditioners are sold with rated heating and cooling capacities — you choose one based on the cooling and heating capacity required for your room(s).

Shown in the table is the highest capacity we measured in our test (see *How we tested*, below).

10-year running costs We calculated how much each model costs to deliver 2000 kWh of cooling and 2000 kWh of heating per year when running at its measured maximum capacity (based on electricity costs of 15 cents/kWh), and multiplied the result by 10. The figures are worst case for inverter models, as their efficiency improves when they're not running at full capacity.

We didn't include standby costs (for power used when the air conditioner is plugged in but not operating), as based on previous tests they're likely to be only a few dollars a year. It may still be a good idea to unplug your air conditioner (if possible) when it's not in use for long periods of time.

Price Recommended retail as of April 2007.

* *Lowest fan setting.*

(A) The outdoor unit is being replaced by model RX35EAVMA, which has minor changes.

(B) Discontinued, but may be available in some shops.

(C) Cooling only.

(D) Based on a price survey in April 2007.

heat from the inside to the outside. **Heat** Pumps heat from the outside to the inside. **Dry** Dehumidifies the air (while cooling only slightly). **Fan only** (all except the MITSUBISHI and PANASONIC) Blows air without heating, cooling or drying. This can be useful when it's not hot enough to justify running the air conditioner and all you want is a bit of a cooling breeze.

- Some models (see the table for details) have settings with reduced airflow (**quiet operation**) and/or extra-high airflow (**fast** or **jet operation**).
- A **sleep mode** adjusts the temperature in several steps (up when cooling, down when heating) so the air conditioner works less hard (more quietly) when you're sleeping. You can program how long you want the sleep mode to operate for. See the table for which models have this feature.
- **Adjustable louvres** allow the air to be distributed more evenly. Point them up for cool air and down for warm — this can be done via the remote on all the tested models. Left and right adjustability helps direct air where it's particularly needed. On the PANASONIC you can do this using the remote; on all other models you have to do it manually. All the tested models also have an **auto-swing** function for vertical airflow (the PANASONIC in addition for horizontal airflow).
- **Restart delay** This is a protective feature that prevents the air conditioners from starting up again too soon after being switched off.

HOW WE TESTED

- To determine their cooling and heating efficiency, our testers operated the air conditioners continuously at their maximum thermostat and fan settings. The results are a worst-case efficiency scenario for inverter models, as most of the time they'll run at lower than their maximum capacity. The testers used the test room and climate conditions in the Australian standard, measuring and rating the cooling/heating output (in kW) per kW of power used. In addition, they measured the units' cooling efficiency at 50% of the measured maximum capacity.
- The testers measured the indoor airflow (in litres per second) on the highest and lowest fan settings.
- They assessed the ease of use of the remote controls, instruction manuals and timers, as well as the ease of removing and refitting the air filters for cleaning.
- The testers measured the noise levels of the indoor unit with the fan on the lowest possible setting, and of the outdoor unit while it was installed in our test room.

Sweet delusions

YOGHURT

Trying to lose weight? Yoghurt's got a healthy image, so combined with a lower-fat claim you might think it's a good way to help you keep off the kilos. Think again. Some of these healthy-sounding yoghurts can be more fattening than regular full-fat brands.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Lots of yoghurts with a 'lite' or 'low fat' claim contain so much sugar you'd be eating more kilojoules than in a full-fat yoghurt.**
- **'Low fat' — which means 3% or less fat — doesn't mean much with yoghurt anyway. Most full-fat yoghurts only contain about 3.4%. Cut through the creative labelling and check the nutrition panel.**

Less fat (just) but more kilojoules

First, 'low fat' doesn't always mean as much as you might think. According to our food regulator's code of practice, the term can only be used if the food contains no more than 3% fat. And on average, regular full-fat yoghurt contains about 3.4% fat. That's only marginally more fat to start with — hardly worth worrying about as long as you check the nutrition panel to avoid the 'Greek' and 'European-style' yoghurts that often have a lot more.

Second, quite a lot of the flavoured yoghurts we bought from major supermarkets make healthy-sounding claims of one sort or another, including 'low fat', 'lite' and so on. However, most of these yoghurts in fact give you more kilojoules per serve than plain full-fat yoghurt, and some of them more even than YOPLAIT Original Strawberry, the top-selling full-fat flavoured yoghurt. These unexpected and unwanted kilojoules come from sugar.

Even a serve of unsweetened plain full-fat yoghurt has about two teaspoons of sugar (lactose) from the milk, but many of the flavoured yoghurts have another five or more teaspoons of table sugar (sucrose) added by the manufacturer.

It's true that, gram for gram, sugar gives you less than half the kilojoules you'd get from fat. Whether they're from sugar or fat, though, if your food gives you more kilojoules than your body uses you'll put on weight. And packing in the sugar packs in the kilojoules.

Brands with healthy-sounding claims or names but so much sugar (more than 28 g or seven teaspoons, the equivalent of 476 kJ per 200 g serve) as to push them way up for kilojoules are:

- BROOKLEA Lite Strawberry.
- HOME BRAND Low Fat Strawberry.
- YOPLAIT Lite Strawberry.
- NESTLÉ All Natural 99% Fat Free Strawberry.
- SKI D'LITE Wild Strawberry.
- ALIVE Soygurt Strawberry.
- BULLA Greek Gourmet Tropical.
- TAMAR VALLEY Greek Style with Strawberry.

Grand masters of spin

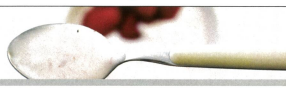
Manufacturers have no trouble with creative labelling spin despite the minor difference between low-fat and many full-fat yoghurts, despite the amount of sugar/kilojoules some of the yoghurts claiming 'lite' or 'low fat' contain and, it seems, despite the code of practice. The two highest-kilojoule yoghurts we found make fat claims: ATTIKI ATTITUDE Wild Strawberry (1722 kJ/serve) boasts that it's '96% fat free' and GIPPSLAND DAIRY Berry Twist (1346 kJ/serve) even thinks it's worth claiming '94% fat free'. So much for the code of practice, which says claims of 'x% fat-free' shouldn't be used for products with more than 3% fat.

Check the nutrition information panel to see how much fat and kilojoules your yoghurt really contains. It's not hard to find brands with less than 20 kJ of fat >

WHAT TO BUY

NESTLÉ Diet Strawberry	$1.30
YOPLAIT No Fat Strawberry	$1.10
YOU'LL LOVE COLES Extra Lite Strawberry & Vanilla	$1.00
ATTIKI Acidophilus Skim Milk Strawberry	$1.25
BROWNES Friendly aB+ Diet Strawberry Sundae	$0.90

All these fruit yoghurts combine low fat with low kilojoules; the first three are artificially sweetened. The prices are for 200 g and are based on those we paid in Sydney in February 2007.



PRODUCT	CLAIM	ENERGY PER SERVE (kJ)			
Brand (listed in increasing order of energy per serve)	Healthy-sounding fat claim?	Total	From fat	From sugars	Serve size (g)
Nestlé Diet Strawberry	✓	336	7	163	200
Yoplait No Fat Strawberry	✓	388	<11	201	200
You'll Love Coles Extra Lite Strawberry & Vanilla	✓	426	7	180	200
Attiki Acidophilus Skim Milk Strawberry	✓	436	7	238	200 (A)
Brownes Friendly aB+ Diet Strawberry Sundae	✓	438	10	228	200
Soy Life Boysenberry	✓	586	39	298	175
Generic plain yoghurt (full-fat)		608	252	160	200
Gippsland Organic 99% Fat Free Strawberry	✓	612	37	316	200
Yoplait Heart Active Strawberry	✓	642	30	398	200
Sumore Extra Light Strawberry	✓	654	7	466	200 (A)
Vaalia Low Fat Vanilla Blueberry	✓	712	84	458	175
You'll Love Coles Lite Strawberry	✓	716	59	442	200
Vaalia Duos Low Fat French Vanilla on Luscious Berries	✓	723	84	470	175
Brooklea Lite Strawberry	✓	746	59	513	200 (A)
Attiki Country Style Strawberry Reduced Fat	✓	750	96	343	200 (A)
Logicol Strawberry	✓	750	111	282	200
Home Brand Low Fat Strawberry	✓	754	7	500	200 (A)
Yoplait Lite Strawberry	✓	760	74	517	200
Nestlé All Natural 99% Fat Free Strawberry	✓	768	67	513	200
Ski D'Lite Wild Strawberry	✓	778	67	493	200
Jalna Low Fat Strawberry	✓	788	148	377	200
Pauls Family Pack Strawberry		798	192	435	200 (A)
Bornhoffen Strawberry with Honey		810	229	360	200 (A)
Sumore Creamy Strawberry		852	185	507	200 (A)
King Land Organic Soy Strawberry	✓	856	229	367	200 (A)
Yoplait Original Strawberry		892	237	513	200
Alive Soygurt Strawberry	✓	916	126	496	200
Dairy Farmers Daily Strawberry		916	222	473	200 (A)
Just Organic Wildberry		922	333	408	200 (A)
Gippsland Organic Full Cream Strawberry		928	348	330	200
Ski Divine Wild Strawberry		940	281	466	200
You'll Love Coles Creamy & Smooth Strawberry		940	281	462	200
Dairy Farmers Gourmet Crushed Summer Berries		965	326	419	180
Brooklea Indulge Strawberry		992	281	537	200 (A)
Jalna Vitalize with Vitamins	✓	1015	185	456	250
Jalna Premium Strawberry Creamy		1044	340	408	200
Yulla Banana		1052	527	393	150
Bulla Greek Style Gourmet Tropical	✓	1064	222	503	200 (A)
King Island Dairy Creamy Indulgent		1090	466	432	200 (A)
Envy Gourmet Passionfruit		1132	385	547	200
Tamar Valley Greek Style with Strawberry	✓	1150	281	612	200 (A)
Gippsland Dairy Berry Twist	✓	1346	444	425	200 (A)
Attiki Attitude Wild Strawberry	✓	1722	229	445	200 (A)

PHOTOS: GENE ROSS

USING THE TABLE

Product Most manufacturers make several flavours and we couldn't test them all, so we chose strawberry unless a brand didn't have that flavour or it wasn't available at the time. We also excluded special kids' yoghurts. The yoghurts are listed from lowest to highest total energy (kilojoules) per serve. We've included average figures for generic plain full-fat yoghurt in the table for comparison.

Healthy-sounding fat claim We looked for any claim on the packaging (including the product name) that could be taken as suggesting that you'd be getting a yoghurt with less fat than regular yoghurts. Examples include 'low fat,' contains 0.8% total fat,' '98% fat free', even '94% fat free'.

Energy per serve The total energy comes directly from the nutrition information panel on the label. We used standard conversion factors to calculate the values for energy from fat and from sugars from the stated amounts of fat and sugars per serve. The combined kilojoules from fat and sugar are less than the total because the latter includes kilojoules from other nutrients — mainly protein.

Serve size Where possible we used the manufacturer's recommended serve size. For most brands it's 200 g, but a few manufacturers give serve sizes so different as to make comparisons meaningless. We therefore used the manufacturer's serve size when it was between 150 g and 250 g, and otherwise reset it to 200 g.

(A) Different from the manufacturer's serve size.

For yoghurt, 'low fat' doesn't necessarily mean much. On average, regular full-fat yoghurt contains around 3.4% fat, which is only marginally more than a legitimately described low-fat yoghurt (3% or less).

< per 200 g serve, and with comparatively few kilojoules. The ones in the *What to buy* list, page 42, manage it and there are others in the table, page 43.

Sweet spot

Less sugar can come at a price you might not want to pay. The three yoghurts with fewest kilojoules — NESTLÉ Diet Strawberry, YOPLAIT No Fat Strawberry and YOU'LL LOVE COLES Extra Lite Strawberry and Vanilla — are artificially sweetened with acesulphame potassium (950) and aspartame (951).

Apart from it taking a while to get used to the different taste, there have been reports linking artificial sweeteners to increased risk of cancer. Experts, though, are generally convinced that any risks are extremely small, and you have to balance these small risks against the very substantial risks to your health from being overweight. But at the same time it's a good idea to limit your intake of artificially sweetened foods and drinks. (For more on this see *Diet cola myths* in the April 2007 issue of CHOICE.) ■

A HEARTY SERVE?

YOPLAIT Heart Active claims it "lowers cholesterol by up to 15%". We're not convinced. There's good evidence that the plant sterols in this product can lower your blood cholesterol levels, but only by about 10% and only if you eat 2–3 g of sterols daily. One serve of YOPLAIT Heart Active contains only 0.8 g of plant sterols, so to get 2–3 g you'd have to eat at least three 200 g tubs of yoghurt. And three tubs would give you 1930 kJ — that's nearly a quarter of a day's energy needs for an adult. YOPLAIT's manufacturer, National Foods, told us it has evidence for the claim but refused to let us see it.

Yoghurt trivia

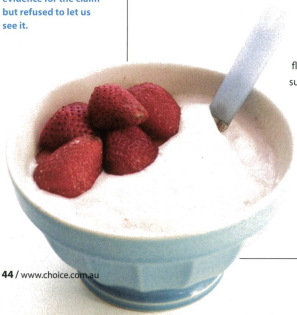
Lively company

Yoghurt's made by fermenting warm milk with a starter culture — a combination of harmless bacteria that feed on lactose, a naturally occurring sugar in milk. This produces lactic acid, which curdles the milk and gives it its distinctive tangy taste. Set yoghurt is fermented in the tub it's sold in and has a jelly-like consistency; stirred yoghurt is fermented in large vats before being poured into the tubs.

Some brands claim their yoghurt contains 'friendly' bacteria — usually lactobacilli and bifidobacteria — that are good for your health. While experts are convinced that eating live 'friendly' bacteria can be beneficial in principle, the scientific evidence is limited to a few specific strains of bacteria that are tough enough to survive passing through your gut. There's no guarantee that any of the yoghurts on the market contain enough of the right bacteria to do you any good (for more on this see CHOICE, July 2006).

Sugar in disguise

Mostly the sugar that's added to flavoured yoghurts is sucrose, the same sugar you might put in your coffee, but some manufacturers can be tricky. Sugar also comes disguised as fructose, fruit juice concentrate or honey. Honey is about 80% sugar (glucose and fructose). Fructose (or fruit sugar) is no healthier than sucrose — and it's just as fattening.



Hidden extras

Not surprisingly, a 'Greek' or 'European' style yoghurt with 8–10% fat tastes deliciously creamy. A low-fat yoghurt, on the other hand, can have a thin and watery texture that's not so attractive, and when you open it there might be a watery layer on the top.

There are thickeners that manufacturers can add to low-fat yoghurts that make them taste quite creamy and prevent separation. You'll see them listed (usually as a number) in the ingredients list. Gelatine (441) and pectin (440) are familiar to most people; you'll also see various forms of starch (1442, 1422) and gums extracted from land plants or seaweed (406, 410, 412, 414).

They're only used in small amounts and there are no safety issues, but combining them in the right proportions to get a really creamy texture is quite an art. It's worth trying different brands of low-fat yoghurt to see which you like best — some manufacturers have better R&D labs than others.

Fruit … or jam?

Don't necessarily expect the fruit in your yoghurt to be much like the pictures on the label. PAULS Family Pack Strawberry and DAIRY FARMERS Daily Strawberry are only strawberry-flavoured, with no real fruit at all. And we found other products in which the 'fruit' was a kind of jam made from strawberry purée, water and sugar with thickeners, colours and food acids. You can only tell by looking closely at the ingredients list: if it's not real fruit you'll see something like 'fruit' followed by sugar and other ingredients, all enclosed within square brackets.

Home theatre projectors

Movies in your lounge room.

Being immersed in a movie on a big screen in your own home puts digital projectors alongside LCD and plasma screens on many home theatre wish lists.

CHOICE *Computer* recently tested five digital projectors designed for home theatre setups. They're great for watching movies but not as suitable for everyday TV watching or playing games, as the lamps have a limited lifespan and are relatively expensive to replace.

You can set up a projector in several ways:

- **On the table or floor** in front of the screen.
- **Mounted** on the ceiling or a wall using a permanent bracket. Some brackets tuck away to conceal the projector when it's not in use, although they generally require professional installation.
- **Reversed** on either the floor or ceiling. The image is projected through a special rear projection screen and the audience sees it from the other side.

If you choose a permanent setup, think about the viewing distance between the projector and the screen, as it varies and will affect the size of the picture. The manufacturer should list the maximum and minimum viewing distances at different screen sizes in the product manual. You'll also need a darkened room, particularly if you position the projector at any distance from the screen.

The two most common projector types are liquid crystal display (LCD) and digital light processing (DLP). Both technologies have historically had their pros and cons but they've improved over the last few years and you're unlikely to notice a significant difference. The EPSON was the only LCD projector in the CHOICE *Computer* test.

Things to watch out for

- **Resolution** The 'native' resolution is the resolution at which the projector can display images without having to scale the picture up or down.

Three of the projectors have a native resolution of 1280 x 720, which you may see listed as 720p. They're considered high-definition (HD) projectors. The SHARP and INFOCUS projectors have a resolution of 480p, which isn't a high-definition standard. Both projectors performed well, however —they produced good colours, although the INFOCUS lacked some detail.

If you're after the highest native resolution possible, you'll now find projectors with 1080, often referred to by manufacturers as 'true HD' or 'full HD'. They're expensive, though — twice or even three times as much as the most expensive one in this test.

- **Lamp life** Projector lamps generally last 2000–3000 hours depending on the settings you use. They can be replaced, but they're pricy — about $450–$660. You also have to let the projector cool down before you unplug it from the power, otherwise you risk damaging the lamp.

Screen scene

Home theatre enthusiasts would argue that the projector is only half the story — the screen is equally important. Projection screens use a blank surface, usually highly reflective fabric, to enhance the brightness of the projected image. A screen can cost thousands of dollars, depending on the materials and the complexity of the setup, and you may also need to consider installation costs.

A specialised screen can add to the experience, but don't feel pressured to spend a fortune. You can also buy special paint designed to create a video projection surface. And you can project images onto a plain white wall, although you'll probably lose some brightness and detail.

CHOICE *Computer*, May/June 2007, has the full test results, features and specifications. If you'd like to subscribe, go to choice.com.au/magazines or call 1800 069 552 toll-free. ■

ON TEST

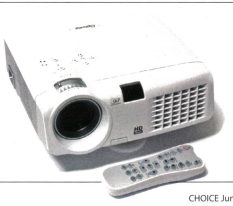
In rank order, overall score in brackets

OPTOMA HD70 DMD Projection Display (70%)	$2399
SHARP XV-Z100 (67%)	$2499
INFOCUS IN72* (63%)	$1399
EPSON Dreamio Home Projector EMP-TW700 (62%)	$2999
BENQ Digital Projector PE7700 (59%)	$2499

* *Discontinued but may still be available in shops.*

WHAT TO BUY

The OPTOMA HD70 DMD Projection Display scored best overall and for picture quality, outperforming the more expensive models. It's also the lightest and smallest projector in the test, although it has a relatively high heat output, so is probably best used in a well-ventilated room.



GENE ROSS

Small is beautiful

While there are many whiz-bang microwaves on the market these days, complete with grilling capabilities, 'inverter' technology and more, there's still a big place in the market for the simple, easy-to-use compact microwave. We tested nine of them, priced $129–$249.

If, like many people, your primary use for a microwave oven is defrosting meat, cooking vegetables and reheating last night's takeaway, our top four ovens will suit you just fine.

A higher price doesn't necessarily mean a better microwave. One model in the *What to buy* list, the BLACK & DECKER, costs only $129. The CONIA, the lowest-scoring model, is the same price.

Sensor technology

Most of the compact microwaves on test have limited functions, but the SAMSUNG has a sensor function for fresh vegetables, potatoes, microwave meals and popcorn. We used the function to cook broccoli and achieved excellent results. Unfortunately the rest of its cooking results weren't as good.

Sensor microwaves measure vapours emitted from the food during cooking and use this to control cooking time. Unlike other automatic cooking programs, which rely on programmed times and portion sizes, sensor microwaves only need to know the food type.

Sensor cooking is effective and easy, as no guesswork is required to get the desired results. The disadvantages are that you won't know when the food will be ready until the last few minutes of cooking time, and you're unable to open the door while the food's cooking, as this will disrupt the process. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- **If you just use a microwave for basics like defrosting and reheating, many of these small models will fit the bill.**
- **Most of these microwaves have limited functions, but one has sensor technology.**

what to buy

PANASONIC NN-S235WF		$149
LG MS-2645DPA		$199
BLACK & DECKER BMO900	BEST BUY	$129
SANYO EMS3553S		$179

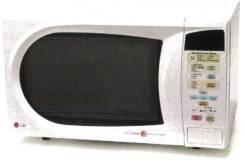
Detailed scores and features for the microwaves in the *What to buy* list are in the table. Here's what they look like.

about the rest

- The TIFFANY, NEC and CONIA were brought down by comparatively low ease of use scores. Typical problems were vents on top that collect dust and poor visibility through the door during cooking. The CONIA also got the lowest cooking score.
- The SAMSUNG and SHARP have comparatively low cooking scores. Despite being the only model with a sensor function, the SAMSUNG only scored around 50% for auto defrosting of chicken and mince. The SHARP lost points for comparatively low scores in three out of the four defrosting tests.

PRODUCT	PERFORMANCE			INDIVIDUAL COOKING TEST SCORES							
Brand / model (in rank order)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Cooking score (%)	Auto defrost chicken (%)	Auto defrost mince (%)	Auto cook broccoli (%)	Auto reheat typical meal (%)	Manual defrost chicken (%)	Manual defrost mince (%)	Manual cook broccoli (%)	Manual cook rice (%)
Panasonic NN-S235WF	85	70	91	90	100	100	na	80	100	100	80
LG MS-2645DPA	82	80	83	80	72	100	na	80	80	100	80
Black & Decker BMO900	79	64	86	90	100	na	70	80	100	100	80
Sanyo EMS3553S	78	67	82	90	70	na	na	90	75	100	100
Tiffany MWSS23 (A)	75	60	82	90	77	na	na	80	100	100	60
Samsung MS83HCE	74	80	72	50	51	100	na	70	65	100	80
NEC N924P	69	55	75	60	55	100	na	50	100	100	60
Sharp R200K	69	66	70	80	59	80	na	50	64	80	60
Conia CMW2101S	64	60	65	60	30	na	70	80	40	100	80

The PANASONIC is the top-scoring microwave oven and is reasonably priced at $149.



The LG has very good visibility through the door during cooking. It also comes with a two-year warranty.

BEST BUY

The BLACK & DECKER is one of the cheapest models tested and comes with a two-year warranty.

The SANYO has excellent scores for manual cooking of rice and broccoli, and auto and manual defrosting of chicken.

		FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS			
Manual reheat typical meal (%)	Manual reheat non-refrigerable food (%)	Auto cook	Auto reheat	Auto defrost	Sensor cook	Quick / boosted start	More / less time	Power output (W, claimed / measured)	External dimensions (H x W x D, cm)	Contact	Price ($)
70	77	✓	✓	✓				800/800	48 x 29 x 37	panasonic.com.au	149
70	83	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	1000/1000	51 x 31 x 42	lge.com.au	199
70	84			✓				900/900	51 x 31 x 37	blackanddecker.com.au	129
70	74	✓	✓	✓				900/800	51 x 31 x 38	sanyo.com.au	179
65	74	✓	✓	✓		✓		900/850	51 x 31 x 41	gafcontrol.com.au	169
70	72	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	850/800	49 x 28 x 36	samsung.com.au	169
70	91	✓	✓	✓		✓		900/900	50 x 30 x 38	nec.com.au	249
65	84	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	800/750	46 x 28 x 36	sharp.net.au	139
70	90	✓	✓	✓		✓		800/850	49 x 30 x 39	pebble-ltd.com.au	129

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Ease of use score: 30%
- Cooking score: 70%

Features See *What to look for*, page 48.

Power output Compact microwaves have a wattage range of 800–1000 W. The higher the wattage, the faster the food will cook.

Price Recommended retail as of March 2007.

(A) Discontinued, but may still be available in some shops.

A higher price doesn't necessarily mean a better microwave. One model in the *What to buy* list, the Black & Decker, costs only $129. The Conia, the lowest-scoring model, is the same price.

what to look for

- **The basics** Easy-to-use controls and instructions, a bright light, large clear viewing window and easy-to-clean interior and exterior surfaces. Make sure you can fit in your microwave-safe cooking dishes (take dishes you're likely to use to the shop with you). You need about 10 cm of space around the outside of the oven for ventilation, plus 20 cm above it.

  The table on page 47 lists which models have the following features, unless noted below.
- **Automatic functions** for defrosting, cooking and reheating are convenient if you cook foods covered in the programs. Automatic defrost features usually ask you to enter the weight and type of food, and the oven calculates the time.
- **Sensor cooking** See page 46.
- **Quick/boosted start** A handy way of starting the oven, usually by pressing a single button.
- **More/less time** Allows you to increase or decrease the time programmed during cooking.
- **Multi-stage programming** Models with this feature can be programmed to perform a sequence of functions — for example, defrost, cook, then leave to stand. All but the PANASONIC, TIFFANY and CONIA have this function.
- **Child safety lock** Allows you to push a sequence of buttons to deactivate the microwave. All the tested models have this feature.

HOW WE TESTED

- For manual and automatic defrosting tests, our tester defrosted mince and a whole chicken. In both cases it's easy for parts of the food to start cooking if the auto defrost time is too long, or if the heat distribution in the oven isn't even.
- To test the cooking capabilities of the oven, she cooked broccoli with manual programming, and with auto when there was a program; it's easy to tell if broccoli gets overcooked. She also cooked rice with manual programming — it requires a uniform temperature and specific power level.
- To test the reheating functions of the microwaves, our tester checked both auto and manual reheating of a typical meal — just as you might heat up last night's leftovers. She also reheated quiche, a non-stirrable, high-fat food, and measured whether it was heated evenly throughout and to a high enough temperature; she also checked if there was any drying of the outside edges.
- For ease of use, she checked that controls are easy to operate and instructions easy to follow; whether there's a large viewing window that's easy to see through and an effective light. She also checked that that the interior and exterior are easy to clean and there are few cracks and seams that can accumulate dirt.

GENE ROSS

GEOFF AMBLER

The NEC is the most expensive oven tested but scored equal second-lowest overall. While some people might like the uncluttered look, it means the the display panel and most controls can only be accessed with the door open, and there's very poor visibility during cooking.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

- **If you have hand weakness or dexterity problems, the PANASONIC would be suitable as it has a wide pull-lever at the bottom of the door that makes it very easy to open and requires little effort.**
- **For someone with vision impairment, either the LG or the SAMSUNG is a good choice as there's good visibility through their doors during cooking and the digital displays are large and clear.**
- **The SAMSUNG is also suitable for those with cognitive impairment, as its control panel is colour-coded and well grouped, making it fairly easy to understand.**

Fan-tastic

Four of the tested convection heaters have a fan to help move the warm air around the room. This generally helps heat up a room faster and gives better heat distribution (see Figure 1, page 51), but our test showed it also makes it harder for the thermostat to maintain the desired temperature once you've reached it. So the best way to use one of these heaters is to run the fan initially, then switch it off for the heater to maintain a comfortable temperature.

The DIMPLEX and IXL Quasar Electronic didn't manage to raise the test room temperature by 10°C without using their fan.

Some of the fans are loud enough to impact on a conversation or TV sound, which is another reason for not wanting them running all the time. Note that the fan on the DELONGHI HS25F can only be switched off at the lowest heat setting.

Innovation

There are new kids on the convection heater block — models with an additional radiant heating element, such as the HOTPOINT and MISTRAL models in this test. This is designed to provide immediate heat for somebody sitting in front of the heater while the rest of the room is heated by convection. However, the exposed element also increases the risk of singeing or even igniting things you put on top or in front of it — and they're not the best choice if you have small kids.

Expensive to run

Convection heaters are convenient — you can move them from room to room — and generally cheaper to buy than flued or unflued gas heaters (see the May 2007 issue for a test of the latter). They're fairly fast to heat up a small to medium-sized room, especially if they have a fan.

Like most electric heating, though, they're expensive to run. If you have several in different rooms through your home or use a couple to heat a large living area, you could be in for a nasty surprise on your winter electricity bill. There are more energy-efficient and cheaper ways to heat your rooms — see *Want more info?*, page 51, for where to find out about them.

Safety

- All the surface temperatures were within the allowed limits.
- All the models passed our stability test.
- When put on their side, all the models switched off in around a couple of minutes except the IXL Pacific, which continued to heat for the duration of the test (30 minutes) without sustaining any damage. However, it could be a problem if somebody fell on it who was unable to roll away.
- All the models passed our electrical safety tests.
- Only the DELONGHI HS25F and IXL Pacific passed our (very harsh) towel test — a reminder that you should never put clothing or other flammables directly on top of any heater. See the table, page 50, for detailed results. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: seven 2.4 kW electric convection heaters from $70 to $479 — our results show price isn't a reliable indicator of good performance.**
- **Two models have an exposed radiant heating element, which means you need to be even more careful than usual not to put flammables on top or close to the front of them.**

WHAT TO BUY

DIMPLEX 3088T	BEST BUY	$100
IXL Quasar Electronic 73215		$479
MISTRAL MRCH10	BEST BUY	$70

what to look for

- **Thermostat** This maintains a desired average room temperature (as long as it's within the heater's capacity), and should have a control that's easy to read and set. All the tested models have one.

Check the table, page 50, for which models have the following features.

- **Frost watch** This is claimed to maintain a temperature of about 5°C if the thermostat is left on its lowest setting. We didn't test this feature but it's a good idea for colder climates.
- A **thermal cutout** is meant to prevent the heater from overheating.
- A **tilt switch** turns the heater off when it falls over.
- **Cord length** Check it's long enough for your needs. These heaters aren't supposed to be used with an extension cord — it may get hot and be a fire hazard.

Like most electric heaters, these convection heaters are expensive to run. If you have several in different rooms through your home or use a couple to heat a large living area, you could be in for a nasty surprise on your winter heating bill.

profiles

The models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order.

DIMPLEX 3088T BEST BUY logo please

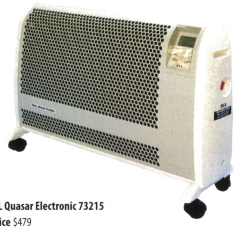
Price $100

Good points

- Comparatively fast at heating up our test room when using its fan.
- Even heat distribution.
- Its thermostat keeps the room temperature very stable.

Bad points

- Without the fan it was a lot slower and didn't manage to raise the room temperature by 10°C.
- The fan was damaged in our towel test.
- No cord storage.



IXL Quasar Electronic 73215

Price $479

Good points

- Even heat distribution.
- The easiest to use.
- Full electronic controls.

Bad points

- It was damaged in our towel test (it didn't restart).
- The heaviest heater in the test.
- Without the fan it was a lot slower and didn't manage to raise the room temperature by 10°C.

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE				FEATURES					
Brand / model (in rank order)	Type	Overall score (%)	Heating score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Towel test	Frost watch	Timer	Thermal cutout	Tilt switch	Fan only / heat without fan	Heat settings
Dimplex 3088T	Convector with fan	76	85	54	(A)	✓		✓		✓/✓	3
IXL Quasar Electronic 73215	Convector with fan	74	74	73	(B)		✓	✓	✓	–/✓	1
Mistral MRCH10	Radiant convector	73	73	72	(C)				✓	No fan	3
DeLonghi HS25F	Convector with fan	69	79	46	Pass	✓		✓		– / at low heat only	3
Hotpoint HPC-668	Radiant convector	67	65	72	(C)				✓	No fan	4
IXL Pacific 72645	Convector	66	70	56	Pass		✓	✓		No fan	1
DeLonghi HCA324FS	Convector with fan	64	69	52	(A)	✓		✓	✓ (D)	✓/✓	3

USING THE TABLE

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Heating: 70%
- Ease of use: 30%

Towel test With the heaters running at their highest setting, we draped a towel over their top, but left any ventilation channels uncovered. A heater passes the test if it doesn't cause any damage to itself or the towel, for example by switching itself off.

Price Recommended retail as of April 2007. Prices vary a lot, so shop around.

CONSUMER NZ

MISTRAL MRCH10

Price $70

Good points

- Its thermostat keeps the room temperature very stable.
- Has an extra radiant heating element.
- Easy to use.

Bad points

- It doesn't have a fan, so it doesn't distribute the heat as evenly in the room as some other models.
- Its radiant heating element singed the towel in our towel test.
- Comparatively short power cord.

HOW WE TESTED

- Our testers assessed the heaters' performance in a thermal comfort lab for the following:

Heating speed How long did they take to raise the room temperature by 5°C and 10°C from an ambient temperature of 8°C?

Heat distribution How evenly did they heat the room?

Thermostat performance How well did the thermostat maintain a selected room temperature?

- They also looked at the use and labelling of controls, the heaters' mobility and stability on hard surfaces and carpet, the cord storage, and the ease of cleaning.
- Safety aspects are important for this type of product. So our testers checked the heaters' electrical safety, measured surface temperatures, and carried out tilt and towel drape tests. They also checked which heaters kept on heating when on their sides, as if they'd been knocked over.

about the rest

- While the DELONGHI HS25F had the second-best heating performance and passed all safety tests, it was let down by its badly labelled and difficult to use controls.
- The other models didn't heat as well as the recommended ones.

WANT MORE INFO?

For more heating information, check the following articles on choice.com.au:

- ***Your heating options*** **tells you the pros and cons of gas and electricity for heating, and which heater type is most suitable for which heating task.**
- **Our interactive *electric heater database* contains information on prices, features and specifications (but no test results) for almost 200 models, as provided by manufacturers. You can search it for the best model for your needs.**

SPECIFICATIONS

(L x H x D, cm)	Weight (kg)	Cord length (m)	Contact	Price ($)
9 x 43 x 17	4.8	2.6	www.dimplex-australia.com	100
9 x 53 x 23	11.5	2.7	www.ixl.com.au	479
9 x 49 x 24	5.6	1.8	1300 363 872	70
3 x 43 x 17	4.0	2.2	www.delonghi.com.au	89
5 x 63 x 26	9.7	2.6	1300 303 929	179
0 x 45 x 25	6.7	1.6	www.ixl.com.au	399
4 x 47 x 17	4.9	2.4	www.delonghi.com.au	139

(A) Damaged fan.
(B) Didn't restart after the test.
(C) This model has an exposed radiant element that singed the towel.
(D) Plus alarm.

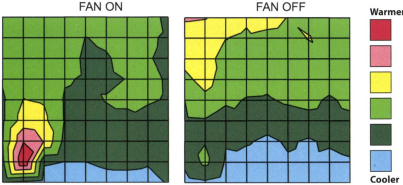


Figure 1. A fan (above left) usually helps heat up a room faster and gives better heat distribution than a model without a fan (above right).

Carpets, floors, tiles ...

EXPENSIVE VACUUM CLEANERS

If you're spending more than $500 on a vacuum cleaner, you want more than a machine that'll clean your carpet and hard floors. For that sort of money, you want one that'll make the dreary job as easy as possible.

The ideal vacuum cleaner should have a long (retractable) cord so you don't need to change power points all the time, a telescopic wand so you don't have to stoop, and all relevant tools stored conveniently onboard so they're at hand when you need them. You might want other features, too, like a HEPA filter, if you're sensitive to house dust, or a turbo brush or power head for extra cleaning grunt — all, of course, in a machine that's not too heavy and easy to manoeuvre around your home.

For this test we bought 11 vacuum cleaners with a recommended retail price between $500 and $1000 to see which ones come close to the ideal.

The table reveals the results in detail. As can be expected of vacuum cleaners from this end of the market, all the vacs scored well overall and all but one are pretty easy to use. All are excellent at cleaning lacquered hard floors without leaving scratches. It was on carpet where some differences between the models became apparent.

Power heads and turbo brushes

Most of the cleaners (seven out of 11) come with an additional turbo brush or power head, accessories designed to enhance cleaning performance, particularly on carpet. A turbo head has a rotating brush driven by the air flowing through it; a power head has an inbuilt motor to drive the brush.

The power heads of the MIELE S5980 and WERTHEIM improved their dirt removal scores most significantly when vacuuming a length of carpet and also scored better for cleaning around edges and corners.

Results with a turbo brush were more erratic, though. The BOSCH registered no improvement, the MIELE S5360 cleaned much better and the SAMSUNG much worse. The table lists scores with and without the extra head. >

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: 11 vacuum cleaners from the pricier end of the market.**
- **Three barrel cleaners did the job very well overall, three others impressed with their power head or turbo brush on carpet and all did an excellent job on hard floors.**

PRODUCT		PERFORMANCE						
Brand / model (in rank order)	Type	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal score from carpet (%)	Dirt removal score from hard floor (%)	Cleaning corners and edges score (%)	Scratch test score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Noise (dB)
Bosch Ergomaxx Hepa BSG82030AU	Barrel	82 / 82	68 / 68	100	74 / 74	100	85	66
Nilfisk X300 Extreme	Barrel	81 / 82	70 / 72	100	70 / 74	100	78	62
Samsung Twin Chamber Silver Nano SC8571 (A)	Barrel	81 / 77	66 / 54	100	68 / 65	100	85	67
Miele S5980 + SEB 217	Barrel	79 / 84	60 / 75	100	75 / 80	100	82	66
Dyson DC08 Telescope Wrap	Barrel	78	62	100	55	100	80	77
Miele S5360 Cat & Dog 5000 (B)	Barrel	78 / 82	62 / 72	98	75 / 80	100	78	66
Dyson DC14 Telescope Reach	Upright	77	66	100	55	100	73	70
Wertheim 3030T	Barrel	77 / 83	58 / 74	97	65 / 75	100	82	67
Electrolux Twinclean Z8220	Barrel	76	56	99	76	100	77	67
LG Cyking V-KC402HTU	Barrel	75 / 78	54 / 60	100	56 / 68	100	82	64
Bissell Lift-off Bagless Deluxe 3750L	Upright	70	48	100	71	100	67	78

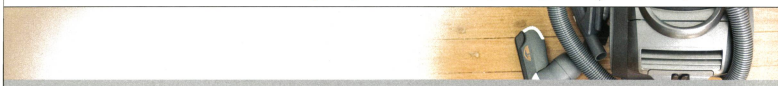
na Not appliable — they're uprights.
(A) Discontinued but should still be available in some shops.
(B) The manufacturer says this model won't be available after September 2007.
(C) Only for two tools.
(D) Removable barrel only 5.2 kg.

USING THE TABLE

The vacuum cleaners are ranked in order of their overall score, which is based on their dirt removal score from carpet using their standard cleaning head. This score is listed first in the column. The second score is from tests with the machines' power head or turbo brush (listed under 'Features'), if any was supplied.

As we had to buy new carpet for this vacuum cleaner test (an 80/20 wool/nylon mix), these dirt removal scores can't be compared to those of previous tests.

Most $500–$1000 vacuum cleaners do a good job and make it easy — as you'd expect at that price.



A power head (top) has an inbuilt motor head that drives the brush and usually improves cleaning performance on carpet. A turbo head (below) delivers less consistent results.

what to look for

It's best to try out a vacuum cleaner in the shop, if you can, to see how easy it is to manoeuvre over carpet and hard surfaces. You should be comfortable with the weight and find the noise not too irritating. A long cord is an added bonus, as is a compact design for easy storage.

The following features can be useful — the table notes which models have them, if it's not stated here:

- **Dust collector** All the tested cleaners have a bag-full indicator. Bin and (in particular) cloth dirt collectors are messier and harder to empty, while paper bags are slightly more user-friendly but have ongoing costs and may be something you occasionally forget to buy.
- **Accessories** All cleaners in the test come with a crevice nozzle, dusting brush and upholstery tools that are conveniently stored onboard (the ELECTROLUX can only store two tools onboard).
- **Variable suction/power** With a variable suction control on the wand and/or a variable power control (usually on the body of the cleaner) you can lower the suction for more delicate jobs such as cleaning curtains.
- **HEPA filter** This stands for high-efficiency particulate air filter — an international standard for filters that trap minute particles — which can help if you have asthma or a dust allergy or sensitivity. However, on some machines you have to replace the filter regularly (about once a year) to ensure it works efficiently.
- **Telescopic wand** This lets you adjust the wand to suit your height, so you don't have to bend too much. All the tested models have one.

FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS				
Turbo or power head supplied	Dust collector	Onboard tool storage	Wand suction control	Variable power	HEPA filter	Power measured at maximum speed (W)	Reach (m)	Weight (kg)	Contact	Price ($)
Turbo	Paper or cloth bag	✓		✓	✓	1670	9.3	7.9	www.boschappliances.com.au	699
Turbo	Paper bag	✓		✓	✓	1780	12.2	10.1	www.nilfisk-advance.com.au	749
Turbo	Bin	✓		✓	✓	1600	10.0	8.1	www.samsung.com.au	649
Power	Paper bag	✓		✓	✓	1920	9.4	9.0	www.miele.com.au	999
	Bin	✓	✓			1400	9.6	8.5	www.dyson.com.au	799
Turbo	Paper bag	✓	✓	✓		1980	9.6	8.4	www.miele.com.au	599
	Bin	✓	na			1400	9.0	8.3	www.dyson.com.au	749
Power	Paper bag	✓		✓	✓	1890	8.8	7.8	www.godfreys.com.au	795
	Bin	✓ (C)			✓	1550	12.7	9.2	www.electrolux.com.au	699
Turbo	Bin	✓		✓	✓	1740	8.5	10.1	www.lge.com.au	699
	Bin	✓	na		✓	1450	9.6	10.1 (D)	www.bissell.com.au	699

Scores The overall score is made up of:

- Dirt removal from carpet: 35%
- Dirt removal from hard floor: 21%
- Cleaning corners and edges: 7%
- Scratch test: 7%
- Ease of use: 30%

Features See *What to look for*, above, for more on the ones in the table.
Measured power Higher power doesn't guarantee better cleaning performance, as the results show.
Price Recommended retail as of March 2007.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

None of the vacuum cleaners is ideal for someone with a disability, but the BOSCH Ergomaxx, MIELE S5980 and SAMSUNG Twin Chamber Silver Nano can be recommended with some reservations. They all have a cleaning head that's easy to manoeuvre and an excellent range of tools with onboard storage, plus very good reach from the power point. The BOSCH's and MIELE's dustbags are easy to remove and replace, and the SAMSUNG's bin is easy to empty and replace.

- **If you're in a wheelchair look for controls that are easy to reach on the wand and require no bending down. The MIELE S5980 and SAMSUNG fit the bill.**
- **If your back is giving you trouble, look for a lighter vacuum cleaner for easier lifting and manoeuvring. The models tested are all on the heavy side; for details, check the table.**

A HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filter can help if you have asthma or are sensitive/allergic to dust, but on some models you have to replace it about once a year to keep it working effectively.

FIGHTING DUST ON THE NANO SCALE

Part of SAMSUNG's 'Silver Nano' range of consumer goods, the SAMSUNG Twin Chamber Silver Nano SC8571 has nanoparticles of silver embedded in its dustbin and filters, where they're claimed to stop bacterial and fungal growth once in contact with dust. A sound theory or simply a marketing gimmick? Is common household dust really so contaminated with germs and fungi that we need a germ-fighting vacuum cleaner?

When we asked about this, SAMSUNG mentioned the benefits of reducing household dust due to Australia's high asthma rate, but failed to answer our actual question. The use of nanoparticles in everyday products is of concern anyway, as the jury is still out on the long-term effects on health and the environment. More on this topic in a future CHOICE.

what to buy

Of the 11 vacuum cleaners tested, six barrel models made it into the *What to buy* list. Three of them scored very well overall and are best for dirt removal from carpet using just the standard heads all the cleaners have. Three others achieved even better dirt removal scores from carpet, but only with their power head or turbo brush. So if you don't mind attaching and using these sometimes heavy accessories, they're recommended as well.

Good all-rounders

BOSCH Ergomaxx Hepa BSG82030AU
Price $699
Good points
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good at cleaning corners and edges.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Telescopic wand.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- The cleaning head is easy to move over carpet.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- Can be used with both paper and cloth bags.
- Dustbag is very easy to remove and install.
- Very good controls.

Bad points
- Nothing in particular.

NILFISK X300 Extreme
Price $749
Good points
- Best in the test for dirt removal on carpet with a standard cleaning head and also good with its turbo brush.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good at cleaning corners and edges.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Telescopic wand.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- The cleaning head is easy to move over carpet.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- Excellent controls.
- Long warranty (five years).
- The quietest in the test.

Bad points
- Very heavy.
- Dustbag is fiddly to remove and install.

Good with power head or turbo brush

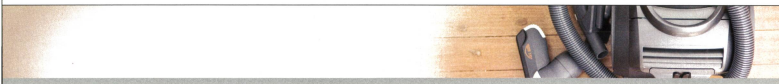
MIELE S5980+SEB 217
Price $999
Good points
- Good for dirt removal on carpet with the power head.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good at cleaning corners and edges.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Telescopic wand.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- The cleaning head is easy to move over carpet.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- The dustbag is very easy to remove and install.
- Excellent controls.

Bad points
- Changing the setting from carpet to hard floor on the cleaning head is very difficult.

MIELE S5360 Cat & Dog 5000
Price $599
Good points
- Good for dirt removal on carpet with the turbo brush.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good at cleaning corners and edges.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Telescopic wand.
- Variable power.
- The cleaning head is easy to move over carpet.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- The dustbag is very easy to remove and install.

Bad points
- Changing the setting from carpet to hard floor on the cleaning head is very difficult.

BEST BUY



SAMSUNG Twin Chamber Silver Nano SC8571
Price $649
Good points
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Telescopic wand.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- The cleaning head is easy to move over carpet.
- Excellent reach from the power point.
- The dustbin is easy to remove and install.
- Excellent controls.

Bad points
- Worse dust collection with the turbo than the standard head.

WERTHEIM 3030T
Price $795
Good points
- Good for dirt removal on carpet with the power head.
- Excellent for dirt removal from a hard floor.
- Good range of tools, with onboard storage.
- Telescopic wand.
- Variable power.
- HEPA filter.
- The cleaning head is easy to move over carpet.
- Very good reach from the power point.
- The dustbag is very easy to remove and install.
- Very good controls.

Bad points
- High-pitched sound can be irritating.

HOW WE TESTED

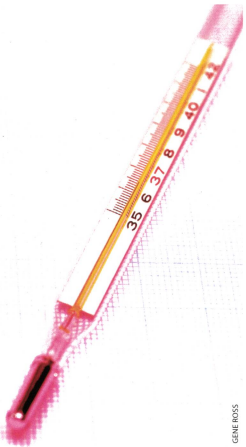
- For the dirt removal tests, our tester embedded sand evenly into a section of carpet, vacuumed it to a set pattern and speed, then weighed the sand collected and recorded it as a percentage of the amount applied.
- He carried out similar tests to determine the dirt removal score from hard floors, but using the cleaners on their hard floor setting (or with a hard floor tool, if supplied).
- All the cleaning tests were done twice for each model, and the results averaged.
- With the vacs also set to the hard floor setting, our tester ran them back and forth 50 times over a lacquered fibre board to see whether they leave scratch marks.
- He spread sand into a 90° corner and vacuumed it to see how well the machines cope with corners and edges.
- For ease of use he assessed the cleaners' general mobility and head movement, their controls, tools and versatility. He checked how easy the machines are to move under low furniture and how easy the dust collectors are to empty and/or change.
- He also measured the machines' noise at the user's position.

Some cleaners have a high-pitched whistle that can be irritating, even though they're no louder than others.

about the rest

- The cleaning head of the DYSON DC08 Telescope Wrap is very easy to move over carpet, but it's not particularly good at cleaning corners and edges, and has a high-pitched sound that can be irritating.
- The DYSON DC14 Telescope Reach upright vac has a built-in hose and wand that forms part of the handle and can be pulled out and used with the tools. Its cleaning head moves easily over carpet, but is fairly high and difficult to use under low furniture. And it has an irritating, high-pitched sound.
- The ELECTROLUX Twinclean Z8220 moves easily over carpet and is good at cleaning corners and edges, but it's very heavy and can only store two tools on board.
- The LG Cyking V-KC402HTU is excellent on hard floor but disappointing on carpet, even with its turbo brush. And it's very heavy.
- The upright BISSELL Lift-off Bagless Deluxe 3750L is also very heavy but has a much lighter, detachable barrel cleaner built-in for use on stairways, car interiors and hard-to-reach areas. A good concept, but it gets very handle-heavy during prolonged use as an upright. And it scored worst in the test for dirt removal on carpet.

Healthcare reform needed to make things fairer



GENE ROSS

Healthcare provision should be based on need, not on the ability to pay — consumers have a right to equitable access to healthcare. The current system requires significant reform. Some of the key problems include:

- There's not enough focus on preventative health. We treat illnesses but don't devote enough resources to preventing them in the first place. Obesity is a prime example, which in 2005 was estimated to cost nearly four billion dollars.
- People in rural and remote areas don't have the same access to services as people living in cities. It costs more and takes longer to access health services in the bush and this has obvious repercussions for health outcomes.
- Our health system doesn't meet the needs of Indigenous Australians, which is one reason why they have a life expectancy nearly 20 years shorter than the total Australian population.
- The Commonwealth and state governments play what a House of Representatives' Standing Committee called the 'blame game', blaming each other for gaps in services.

We can't afford to leave these problems to governments: consumers need to be involved in health system reform. CHOICE is a member of the Australian Health Care Reform Alliance (AHCRA), made up of 46 consumer, healthcare and clinician organisations calling for reform of the Australian healthcare system. AHCRA promotes a vision for citizen engagement in healthcare, which includes consumers having input into how the system works.

AHCRA will explore these issues during a conference on 30 and 31 July 2007, to be held at Old Parliament House in Canberra. To find out more about the conference, see the AHCRA website, www.healthreform.org.au. Registration details are available on the website. If you can't attend the conference but would like to become an AHCRA supporter, please sign up for the AHCRA newsletter. ■

CAMPAIGN NEWS

DIGITAL SECURITY — A GOOD INVESTMENT

Our lives are increasingly moving online, making us reliant on secure IT systems to protect our personal and financial information. But the costs of this security are high and some in the industry want to shift this cost — and the risk of fraud — onto consumers.

That's blaming the victim. Consumers don't have the resources to protect themselves against the rapidly evolving online scams and fraud. Large businesses are in a better position to take the necessary steps to reduce fraud and to share any losses across all those who benefit from online transactions. Companies have saved millions by shifting their business online. They need to realise that reinvestment in IT security is critical to maintaining consumer confidence. Failure to do so will cost them more in the long run.

For more information: choice.com.au/digitalsecurity.

OUR DAILY BREAD

The debate over the mandatory fortification of foods with folate continues, with Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) seeking further comment on its previous proposal to fortify bread and bread products. Mandatory fortification is being proposed as a means of reducing the development of neural tube defects in unborn babies by increasing folate consumption among women of childbearing age.

Adding folate to bread products may prevent a small number of the pregnancies affected by neural tube defects, but it will also expose the entire population — including young children — to increased levels of folic acid, and the long-term health consequences of this aren't yet known.

A cost-effectiveness study commissioned by FSANZ indicated that a health promotion campaign encouraging increased use of folic acid supplements among women of childbearing age would be an effective way of increasing folate consumption and preventing neural tube defects. CHOICE supports this approach, as it would avoid unnecessarily increasing the folate consumption of the majority of people — who aren't women of childbearing age.

RECALLS & bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Product Recalls Australia website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Product Safety Policy section of the ACCC on (02) 6243 1262. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD Nestlé Australia has recalled **Nestlé Kit Kat**, 65 g, Caramel and Cookie Dough varieties, all best-before dates up to and including 14 02 2008.

The problem It may contain pieces of plastic.

What to do Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call 1800 152 126 between 8 am and 6 pm EST.

FOOD Sportsner has recalled **Dieter's Herbal Trim Tea** (AUST L 60147), **Dieter's Herbal Eze Tea** (AUST L 60125) and **Dieter's Wellfit Herbal Tea** (AUST L 60148), sold in NSW.

The problem They have unacceptable microbial levels and salmonella contamination.

What to do Don't drink it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

BOOK Penguin has recalled **Ladybird Baby Touch Busy Book**, an interactive, tactile book. It includes a hard-cased play component on the right side, and tactile elements on each double-page spread. The Ladybird logo is displayed in the top right corner of the title. It has an ISBN number of 978-18442-2755-6, and has been for sale since 27 November 2006.

The problem The cylindrical rattle may come loose, with the small beads posing a choking hazard for young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of young children. Return it to Ladybird Baby Touch Busy Book Recall, Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell 3124. The cost of both the book and postage will be refunded.

TOY Dimmeys stores has recalled **Musical Choo Choo Train**, **Baby Toys Rattle** and **Battery Operated Animals Train**, sold in Dimmeys stores between September 2006 and March 2007, in Gosford, Goulburn, Mt Gambier, Queensland and Victoria.

The problem They contain small parts that pose a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of young children, and return it to any Dimmeys store for a refund.

TOY Happytime Novelty has recalled **Diplomat Indian Archery Set**, item number 3800/3, sold between January 2005 and March 2007.

The problem It doesn't comply with the mandatory toy standard for projectile toys.

What to do Remove it from the reach of children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY Jemark Imports has recalled **Smiley Face Noise Hammer**, toy number 050208.

The problem It poses a choking hazard to young children.

What to do Remove it from the reach of young children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY Our Hauff has recalled **Santas Toys Balls Stair — Ball Stacking and Counter Toy**, product code 95118, serial number P16691006. It was available for sale from 31 October 2002 to 3 November 2006.

The problem It contains small balls that don't meet the mandatory standard.

What to do Remove it from the reach of young children. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information email info@extendabilities.com.au, phone 1300 138 778 or fax 1300 138 211.

TOY Retail Marketing Services has recalled **Santa with Lamp Post Edison-screw lamp**, a Santa with a lamp post, DISPGM14, sold between September 2006 and January 2007.

The problem The metal lampholder isn't designed for 240 V operation, and may become live.

What to do Stop using it. To arrange for modification, return it to 100 Cope Street, Waterloo 2017, or phone 1800 020 020 between 8.30 am and 5.30 pm EST to arrange for collection.

NOVELTY TOY Officeworks has recalled **Double Bubble Gumball Bank**, article number LE1401.

The problem When the dispenser dial is turned, a screw may become loose and fall out.

What to do Return it to your nearest Officeworks store for a refund, or for more information call 1800 611 691.

COMPUTER BATTERY Lenovo has recalled **batteries** that were sold with **Lenovo** and **IBM ThinkPad notebook personal computers**. The batteries are nine-cell extended-life packs that were sold with the following computers: T series (T60 and T60p), Z series (Z60m, Z61e, Z61m and Z61p), R series (R60 and R60e). The batteries were also sold as replacement or extra batteries for the above models, with a battery part/model number FRU P/N 92P1131. The batteries either came with computers sold between November 2005 and February 2007, or were sold separately in that time.

The problem If the computer to which the battery is attached is struck forcefully on the corner, the battery pack can overheat and pose a fire hazard.

What to do To determine whether your battery is affected, go to www.lenovo.com/batteryprogram, or call 131 426 between 9 am and 9 pm EST, seven days a week.

TV International Dynamics Group has recalled **Loewe 100 Hz televisions**, produced in Germany by Loewe between March 1999 and October 2001, and sold in Australia in the months following.

The problem There may be a weakness in a solder rivet connection, which can lead to overheating at the bottom of the set and the chance of ignition.

What to do Don't use the set. Remove the mains plug from the wall socket. Call 1800 456 393 to arrange for an onsite inspection, and free modification if required.

DINING TABLE Freedom has recalled **Calvin Black Glass Dining Table**, Mk2, sold between 4 April 2006 and 15 August 2006, in NSW, Queensland, SA, Victoria and WA. This recall is in addition to the previous recall of the Mk1 models.

The problem Using or moving the table may cause uneven stress to the glass top, possibly causing it to break.

What to do Freedom will contact customers, or contact your nearest store.

LAMP Philips Lighting has recalled the **Essential 50 W, 60 Degree Halogen Dichroic Lamp**, identified on the box as Essential 50 W GU5.3 12 V 60D closed halogen dichroic. The box will also have one of the following barcodes: 871150088638 5 — Essential 50 W GU5.3 12 V Halogen, single-carton pack; 871150088710 8 — Essential 50 W GU5.3 12 V Halogen, two blister pack; 871150087986 — Essential 50 W GU5.3 12 V Halogen, extra-value four-pack carton; and 871150090158 3 Essential 50 W GU5.3 12 V Halogen extra-value six blister pack. They were sold through retail and trade outlets between July 2006 and March 2007.

The problem The glass may separate from the lamp, posing a safety risk. This appears to occur within 30 minutes of use after installation. For this reason, only unused lamps are affected by the recall. If you have a lamp in place and working, it's OK.

What to do Call 1800 048 296 for information on how to return the lamps and obtain replacements, or send the lamps, postage-free, with your name and address to Reply Paid 73, Philips Lighting Product Recall, PO Box 73, North Ryde 1670.

POWER TOOL Hitachi Power Tools Australia has recalled **Hitachi C12FSA Compound Mitre Saw**, sold between December 1997 and February 2007.

The problem The blade guard doesn't provide optimum protection from the exposed lower portion of the blade.

What to do Call 1800 100 600 to arrange for a modification to the blade guard.

CAR Suzuki has recalled the **Suzuki ATV**, model LT-Z90K7, 2007.

The problem The front suspension arm may fail due to insufficient welding.

What to do Contact your nearest Suzuki dealer.

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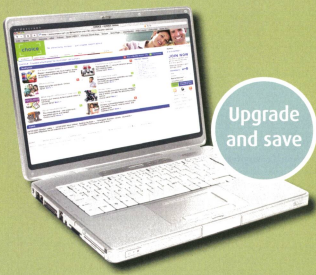

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* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items, letters or recalls. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts and other small pieces.

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HARD word

The prize for best entry goes to D Stannard for the flying ring. Thanks also to P Adams, A Thompson, F Haimes, K McBey, M Tobe and E Raphael for their contributions to this month's Hard Word.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Please don't email us your entries — we need the originals.

fresh
UNIVERSAL BRANDS
avocado
olive
& lemon
HAND CREAM
INGREDIENTS: Water, Mineral Oil,Cetearyl Alcohol, Sorbitol, Isopropyl Palmitate, Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, Petrllatum, Glyceryl Stearate,Stearic Acid, Methylparaben May contain:FD&C Yellow#5 FD&C Red#33

An avocadoey, olivy lemon *colour* perhaps?

Sounds delicious, but this hand cream doesn't seem to contain any culinary ingredients.

ARNOTTS
Snack Right
Apricot fruit slice
a lightly baked fruit slice made succulent apricot and sultanas
ingredients
SULTANA, APPLE AND APRICOT BISCUITS: FRUIT FILLING [FRUIT SY JUICE (6.5% APRICOT) (1%)], SUGAR, GLUCOSE, HUMECTANT (E42 (E440), RICE FLOUR, WHEAT FIBRE, FOOD ACID (E330), FLAVOURING IDENTICAL), PRESERVATIVE (E223), NATURAL COLOUR (160B)], WHE VEGETABLE FIBRE, GOLDEN SYRUP, RICE FLOUR, MILK SOLIDS, SUP MONO(UNSATURATES), EGG, EMULSIFIER (E322 SOY), SALT, RAISIN CONDENSED MILK.
MAY CONTAIN TRACES OF PEANUT, OTHER NUT OR SESAME
TO MAINTAIN FRESHNESS, STORE IN A COOL, DRY PLACE IN AN A CONTAINER. DO NOT PURCHASE IF PACKAGE IS OPEN OR TORN.

Sultana slice

While there's slightly more apricot in these biscuits than there is avocado, olive or lemon in the hand cream (left), at only 1% calling them 'Apricot fruit slice' is a bit of a stretch.

Know any Brians who need improved development?

Maybe the copywriter should have taken these as a kid.

At least they admit your saving is negative.

FLYING RING
PLAY FOR FUN
WARNING:
DO NOT LAUNCH OR THROW IN THE DIRECTION OF OTHER PEOPLE. NOT intended for children under 3 years of age.

Play for fun?

D Stannard suggests that following the warning on this flying ring would make for a rather frustrating game of frisbee.

KATE MORGAN
Weight loss Centre
Join the Kate Morgan Weight Loss Program Now
IT WORKS Lose weight quickly, yet easily
IT'S AFFORDABLE Pay less than you spend on meals
IT'S EASY No appointments, no contracts, just come in
SUPPORTIVE We'll advise and support you
INTRODUCTORY OFFER
FREE Lifetime Membership
Only until the end of April 2007

"It works"?

A 'free lifetime membership' doesn't inspire a lot of confidence in the long-term effectiveness of this weight loss program.